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Smale

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Vaughn

CARRIE VAUGHN has published more than two dozen short stories in various magazines and anthologies. Most of her work over the last couple of years has gone into her series of novels about a werewolf named Kitty who hosts a talk radio advice show for the supernaturally disadvantaged. The fourth, *Kitty and the Silver Bullet*, came out in 2008. Look for the fifth, *Kitty and the Dead Man's Hand*, in February, and the sixth, *Kitty Raises Hell*, in March. She lives in Boulder, Colorado. Visit her at www.carrievaughn.com.

JAMES VAN PELT teaches high school and college English in western Colorado. He has been publishing fiction since 1990, with numerous appearances in most of the major science fiction and fantasy magazines, including *Talebones, Realms of Fantasy, Analog, Asimov's, Weird Tales, SCIFI.COM*, and many anthologies, including several "year's best" collections. His first collection of stories, *Strangers and Beggars*, was released in 2002, and was recognized as a Best Book for Young Adults by the American Library Association. His second collection, *The Last of the O-Forms and Other Stories*, which includes the Nebula finalist title story, was released in August 2005 and was a finalist for the Colorado Spruce Young Adult Book Award. His novel, *Summer of the Apocalypse*, was released in November 2006.

Parks

RICHARD PARKS's stories have been appearing in *Realms of Fantasy* almost from the beginning, and his latest is another in the series featuring his Heian-period Japanese paranormal investigator, Goji Yamada. Parks's first novel, *The Long Look*, was published in September 2008 by Five Star Publishing.

TIFFANY PROTHERO has been a freelance illustrator for more than two years. She graduated from San Francisco's Academy of Art University, with an emphasis in book cover illustration. Whether it be quiet thought-provoking moments, or strong emotional tone, Tiffany's art is about allowing the viewer to walk away with a sense of personality and character from her illustration. Like her art, Tiffany's charming personality has brought her great opportunities and great friendships from within the industry. For more of her work visit www.TProthero.com.

CHRIS COCOZZA, an award-winning book cover artist, has illustrated over 500 book covers for major publishers across the United States and abroad. From romance novels to children's books, his portfolio demonstrates a wide range of "looks," photographic to impressionistic, all exquisitely depicting the the concept the client has in mind. Chris was invited in 1995 to be a member of The Society of Illustrator's, in New York City.

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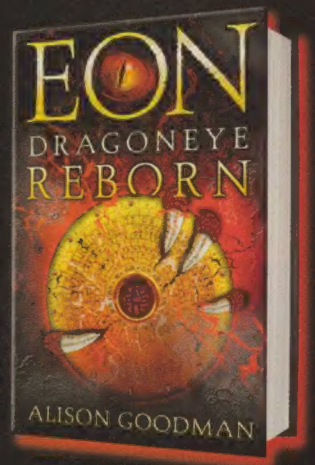

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By Resa Nelson

Reading aloud leads Meggie and her family into the medieval world of *Inkheart.*

This winter's fantasy and horror movies are based on a graphic novel, a Korean ghost story, two novels, and an F. Scott Fitzgerald short story.

Inkheart (scheduled for release on January 9 from New Line Cinema) is based on the novel by *New York Times* best-selling author Cornelia Funke.The main character is 12-year-old Meggie (played in the movie by Eliza Hope Bennett of *Nanny McPhee*), who loves books so much that she sleeps with one under her pillow. It's a love she's inherited from her father Mo (Brendan Fraser of *The Mummy* movies), a man who makes his living restoring books for libraries, antique dealers, and collectors. Meggie and Mo live in a home crammed with stacks of books. It's a habit that runs in the family. Meggie's

ABOVE: When Mo (Brendan Fraser) reads aloud to young Meggie (Mirabel O'Keefe), the book's characters come to life. RIGHT: Dustfinger (Paul Bettany) and Fenoglio (Jim Broadbent) are two characters from the book Inkheart.

Murray Close/New Line Cinema

Aunt Elinor (Helen Mirren of *The Queen*) lives in a house with its own library of rare books that she's spent a lifetime collecting.

Mo has an unusual talent. Whenever he reads aloud, people or things inside the book can cross over from their reality into ours. In other words, just by reading out loud, Mo's words have the power to make a book's characters into flesh-and-blood people. But there's one problem. Whenever someone or something emerges from a book, someone or something in our world is drawn into that book in exchange. It's an exchange that's completely unpredictable and uncontrollable, which makes reading out loud a dangerous pastime.

Ten years ago, Mo unintentionally read characters out of a novel called *Inkheart:* a fire-eater named Dustfinger (Paul Bettany of *A Knight's Tale*) and the villainous Capricorn (Andy Serkis of *The Lord of the Rings* movies). In Funke's novel, Meggie, Mo, and Elinor are chased in and out of an Italian village

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Murray Close/New Line Cinema

that Capricorn has taken over as his own. But in the movie, the heroes are drawn into a medieval world that exists between the covers of a book. And their mission is to find their way back home.

In addition to being the author of *Inkheart,* Funke is also one of the producers of the movie version, which reportedly had a respectable $60 million budget. On her website, she says, "Whether at the movie set or in the theatre—there's nothing more exciting to me than watching other artists telling my stories. I never expect them to do it the same way I did, because that's what's exciting about it: that they make me see my own story through their eyes!

"To tell a story for the stage or the big screen, one has to tell it differently. It has to have its own breath, its own vision and use all the advantages of the art it is told with— the art of filmmaking or of theatre. One main difference is: In a novel an author can take his time for telling a story, and the reader often spends days in that other world, but on a stage or in a movie the director has only two or three hours on his hands—and you can't hear the characters think, like in a book. That is all the art of the actors."

As producer, Funke was on set for several days, which included an interview on the set of Elinor's library for the future DVD of *Inkheart.* "Believe me, Paul Bettany will break all your hearts in this scene," Funke said about watching the filming of a scene about Dustfinger and his unrequited love. "He is such an incredibly wonderful Dustfinger. As for Eliza and Brendan—I saw a scene with them in the van and it seemed like they stepped right out of my book! So brilliant. Andy Serkis as Capricorn is perfect. He is so dark and scary—and funny too!"

According to imdb.com, Funke insisted on casting Fraser as Mo, even though other producers originally hoped to land a bigger Hollywood name for the role. *Inkheart* is the first book in a trilogy, and Funke dedicated the second book, *Inkspell,* to Fraser and sent a signed copy to him.

The movie most likely to generate Oscar buzz is ***The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*** (Paramount Pictures), based on a 1922 Fitzgerald story that was first published in *Collier's Weekly* magazine and then in *Tales of the Jazz Age,* a collection of the author's short fiction. A dead giveaway is the movie's release date: December 25. Also, *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* is packed with star power: screenwriter and Oscar winner Eric Roth (*Forrest Gump*), director David Finch (*Fight Club*), Brad Pitt (*Burn After Reading*), Cate Blanchett (*The Lord of the Rings* series), Tilda Swinton (*Orlando*), and Julia Ormond (*Sabrina*). Due to the peculiar nature of the story, critics have been speculating for months that this film is likely to be either one of the most successful films of 2008 or a dud at the box office.

Fitzgerald's story begins with the birth of a baby boy to the high-society Button family. There's just one problem: the new "baby" is an elderly man who's been wrapped in a blanket and partially stuffed in a crib. When the proud father arrives at the hospital expecting to see a newborn, he's astonished when the old man

asks, "Are you my father?" and then promptly demands to be removed from the hospital. Everyone, including the hospital staff, is mortified and embarrassed by Benjamin's birth. (Fitzgerald never says much about Benjamin's mother, other than to state that she's "fine" after the delivery of her full-grown son!) Set in 1860s Baltimore, Fitzgerald tells a wry tale about a man who, like Merlin of the King Arthur legend, lives backward. Benjamin Button (played by Pitt in the film) ages differently

Merrick Morton/Paramount Pictures

Benjamin Button (Brad Pitt) lives backward, old to young.

from the rest of us, and yet everyone pressures him to conform. His parents were expecting a newborn, so they treat him like one, hoping it will make him "normal." For years, they go to great lengths trying to disguise Benjamin to make him look his age so that he will meet society's expectations. Instead, his parents' behavior prompts Benjamin to find his father's cigars and smoke them instead of playing with toys. His family's main concern is how Benjamin's existence will impact their social standing.

As time passes, everyone else ages naturally while Benjamin "youth-ens." At birth, he's mistaken for his own grandfather. In mid-life, he's mistaken for his own father. As Benjamin continues to age, he's mistaken for his own son and finally for his own grandson. Unlike the rest of us, as Benjamin ages, he constantly gains more vim and vigor, which makes it possible for him to approach life as an adventure instead of settling comfortably into it. Throughout his life, he's constantly criticized for being "different" and pressured to live like everyone else, even though he has no control over the way he ages.

At press time, information about the movie version of *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* is being held under tight wraps, but there appear to be some significant differences between the Fitzgerald story and the movie. Instead of 1860s Baltimore, the story is set in New Orleans around the time of World War I. Also, while the original story focuses on Benjamin's ups and downs in life, the movie expands his romantic journey. According to Wikipedia, Fitzgerald said, "This story was inspired by a remark of Mark Twain's to the effect that it was a pity that the best part of life came at the beginning and the worst part at the end."

The Tale of Despereaux (December 19 from Universal Pictures) is based on a Newbery Award-winning book by Kate DiCamillo. Set in the Middle Ages, this animated film tells the story of three outsiders whose fates are about to intertwine. Despereaux (voiced by Matthew Broderick of *The Producers*) is the only surviving baby in his mother's most recent litter of mice. No one expects him to live, and they're disappointed when he does, mostly because his ears are too big and his eyes open too soon. Despite his gloomy family, Despereaux grows up to be a romantic. He lives in a castle. He loves music and reads books about knights in shining armor and longs to treat a lady with the honor she deserves. When he meets Princess Pea (Emma Watson of the *Harry Potter* movies), Despereaux falls head over heels in love with her. Unfortunately, the princess's father hates rodents. The king sentences Despereaux to death for trying to communicate with humans, banishing Despereaux to the castle dungeon where a swarm of rats waits to kill anything that enters.

But one of those rats isn't like the others. Chiaroscuro (Dustin Hoffman of *Mr. Magorium's Wonder Emporium*) loves light instead of the dungeon's darkness. That love leads him

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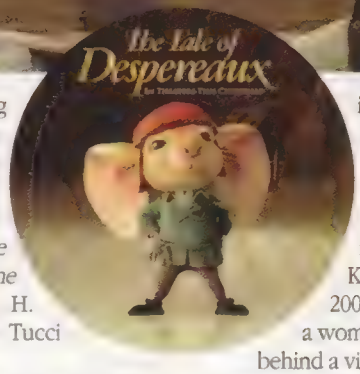
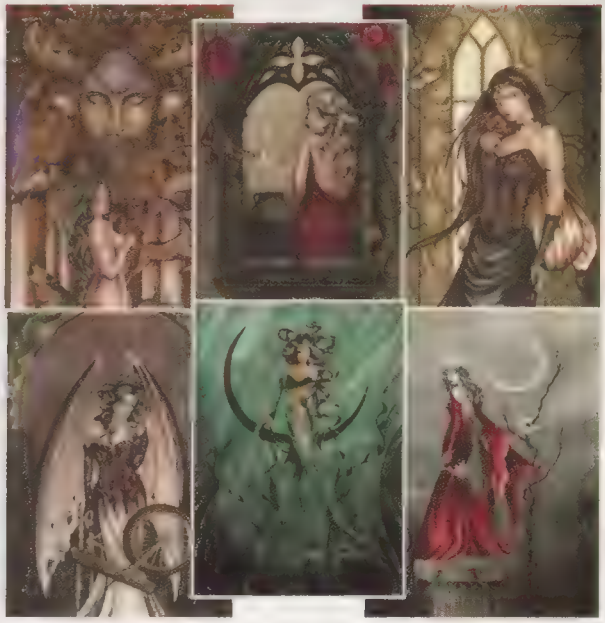
up into the castle and into the queen's soup.

The final outsider is a slow-witted and hard-of-hearing girl named Miggery Sow (Tracey Ullman of *Corpse Bride*). Miggery's father sold her into servitude in exchange for a tablecloth. The girl has been struck so many times that she has cauliflower ears. Still, Miggery has dreams. Someday, somehow, she wants to wear the crown of Princess Pea. When the princess is kidnapped, the fates of Despereaux, Chiaroscuro, and Miggery bump into each other on a journey from the dark dungeon below to the glittering castle above. The all-star cast also includes Sigourney Weaver (the *Alien* movies), Christopher Lloyd (the *Back to the Future* movies), Kevin Kline (*The Princess Bride*), William H. Macy (*Fargo*), and Stanley Tucci (TV's *ER*).



Scheduled for release on January 30 from DreamWorks and Paramount, ***The Uninvited*** is the latest Americanized version of a popular Korean movie (2003's *A Tale of Two Sisters*), which is based on a folk tale. This trend of remaking paranormal movies from Korea started with a bang in 2002 with *The Ring*, the story of a woman who tracks down the story behind a videotape that causes the death of anyone who watches it. Since then, other remakes of Korean movies have included *The*



From the mistress of fantasy, here are twelve of Jessica's favorite picks from the Myth and Magick galleries of Enchanted Art. Includes Wiccan sabbats. X-Large 11x28, thirteen month wall calendar. $14.95

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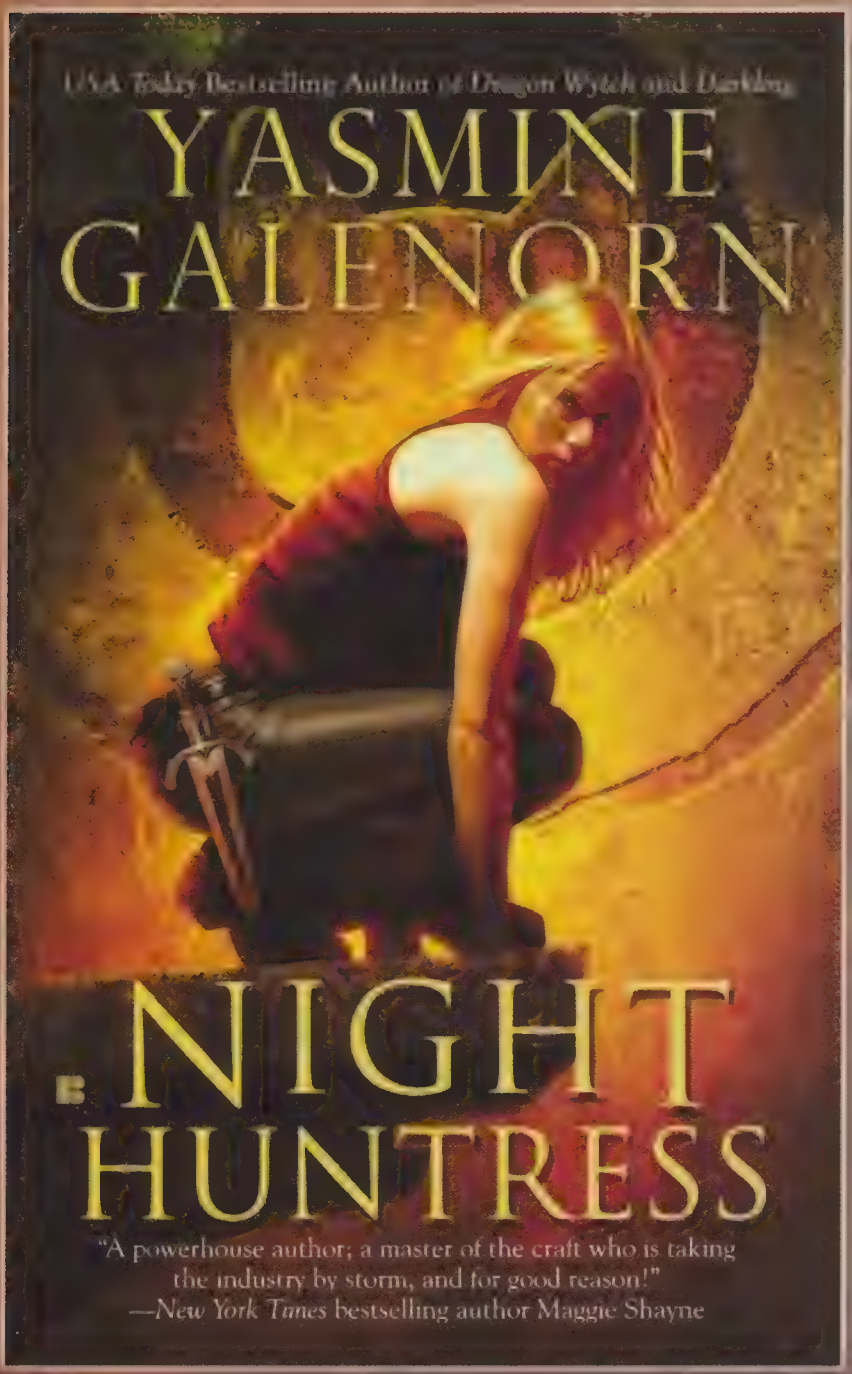
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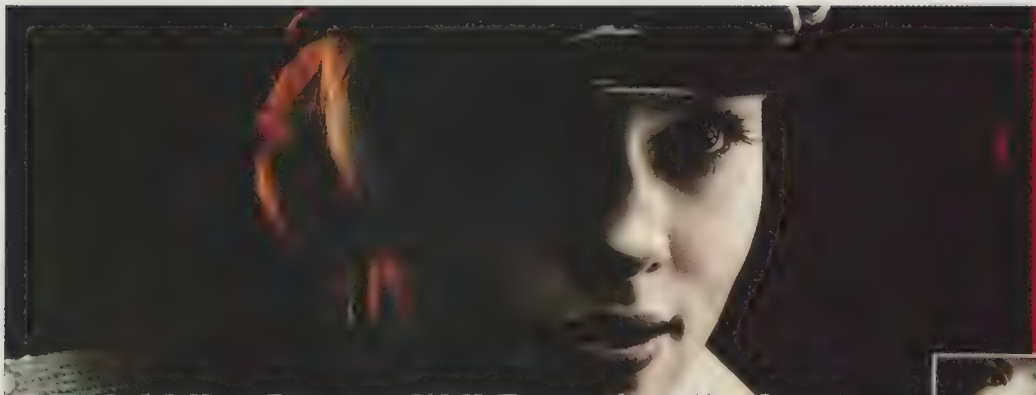


Frank Miller Directs Will Eisner's *The Spirit*

Also slated for a Christmas release is ***The Spirit*** (Lionsgate), based on the comic book created in 1940s by the late Will Eisner, who also happened to be the mentor to director Frank Miller (*300, Sin City*) during his own comic book days. The story is about rookie cop Denny Colt (Gabriel Macht of *The Good Shepherd*), who is murdered and then returns as the Spirit, a secret and masked crime fighter in Central City whose only weapons are his quick wit, sense of humor, and fists. And wherever he goes, he's surrounded by beautiful women who want to seduce, love, or kill him. At the same time, the villainous Octopus (Samuel L. Jackson of Unbreakable) is on a quest to achieve immortality.

Producer Michael Uslan notes Miller was the ideal choice to direct *The Spirit*. "What makes Frank's involvement with *The Spirit* particularly poignant was his special relationship with Will Eisner," Uslan says. "You have two of the medium's greatest storytellers of sequential art and cinematic comics discussing the compelling and controversial art form."

On *The Spirit*'s official website, Frank Miller addressed concerns about *The Spirit* looking too much like *Sin City*. "Much has been the fuss in the comics' blogosphere about my Spirit movie—much justified, much hoped for, and much to my delight, that there has been a fuss at all," Miller says. "Some comics readers are terrified that *The Spirit* will be a retread of my *Sin City*. Others quarrel over the change of the Spirit's traditional blue hat, mask, and jacket to black. These are understandable concerns for any lover of Will Eisner's masterpiece. I take this opportunity to address these concerns. With glee, I take this opportunity.

"*The Spirit* is, with every effort I give it, not a rusty, dusty old monument to the work of my beloved Mentor, so much as it is an extension of what I know to have been Eisner's central intent: to create something new, witty, and exploratory. That's what he did. That's what I'm doing. It only resembles *Sin City* in that I am its director, and, well, yes, I have my ways and my proclivities. Luckily, I was able to discern three important proclivities I share with the Master. We both love good stories. We both love New York City. And we both love beautiful women."

When some fans learned that Miller had changed the Spirit's crime-fighting costume, they worried. "Now, about that blue suit," Miller says. "Comic books have long traditions based on the limitations of predigital printing. Among these are traditions from the old newsprint-run-through-letterpress approach (yes, comics did—and still do—follow tradition that dates all the way back to Gutenberg!). Bad printing on pulp paper is why it was necessary for every superhero to have his emblem printed on his chest, and that everything that's black be printed in blue. Hence Superman's preposterous hair. And the Spirit's blue hat, mask, and suit. In tests—and we did several—the blue made the Spirit look like an unfortunate guest at a Halloween party. Going to black brings back his essential mystery, his Zorro-like sexiness. It also makes that red tie of his look very, very cool. So I made the call, with all respect to Eisner's creation, and most importantly, to what I perceived as his underlying intention. It was an easy call for me to make. The Spirit dresses in black, and looks much the better for it. As I said, my desire was never to slavishly follow the rules of the '40s printing into campy oblivion, but to reintroduce Eisner's creation, via modern technology, to our brave new world."

One of Miller's challenges was changing one of the key characters in the story. "The myth of *The Spirit* would be incomplete without Ellen [Dolan]," Miller says. "Our hero's legendary 'wandering eye' works only if there is somewhere—someONE, from which it wanders. Ellen is the woman Denny Colt would have married, had he not been murdered. Ellen's love anchors him, tethers him to the civilian world, the world of the living. She is his fulcrum, and the romantic lead of his life, if not his every particular adventure. He is, after all, a bit of a rascal. The only problem with Ms. Dolan is that she was, with all respect to my beloved Mentor, a lousy character. She was the boss's daughter. She worried about him incessantly. 'The Spirit's ALWAYS right,' she intoned. She conked him on the head when he roused from unconsciousness with another woman's name on his lips. He even tossed her over his knee and spanked her and she took it. Ellen Dolan made Donna Reed look like Angelina Jolie.

"My first thought was to make Ellen a much stronger tether to reality—in fact, to make her the hero's tether to life itself. Since my interpretation of Eisner's Spirit suffers even more physical punishment than the original—much more, in fact—it figured he'd need somebody to patch him back together again. Hence Dr. Ellen Dolan, the surgeon who knows more about his unusual powers of recuperation than any other doctor on Earth."

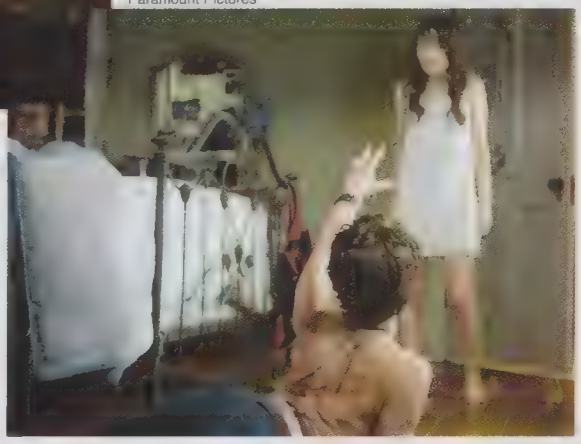
If fans reconcile Miller's decision to bring Ellen from the 1940s into the modern day, some are still worried about CGI. But there's really no need. "There is a theological debate about the role of Computer Generated Images (CGI) that has yet to be engaged," Miller says. "Fanatics of CGI have placed no ceiling on their ambition. The true believers are determined that we can, with just the right use of, say, motion-capture animation, produce life on celluloid (or tape, or whatever) that will breathe and glare and sweat and grunt and triumph as well as any human being could.

"Actors tell the story. Their quirks, their errors, their unexpected sweat, their foibles—that is how we experience drama. The screenplay is the Alpha. The actors, Omega. Everything beyond either of these helps get us there, reinforcing, filling in between these two poles. The story is the thing, it's everything, and only people can tell it. People."

But there's still that nagging worry that Miller will turn his mentor's work into something that looks and feels too much like one of the movies he's directed based on his own work. "And *The Spirit* as some sort of *Sin City Redux*? No,

Sin City, that one's my own baby, folks, and it looks the way it does for its own reasons. *The Spirit* is, and will always be, Eisner's Spirit. Anybody watching me on the set could attest that I very frequently drew a storyboard for a given shot first as I saw it, then as Will might've seen it—and in every case, went with what I saw as Will's version. To drive the point home, *The Spirit*, despite any accidental impression left by that kick-ass teaser-trailer, is a full-color movie. *Sin City*—and I hope to make of it a movie trilogy all its own—come Hell and high water—is, visually, a playhouse for black and white. *The Spirit*'s been one hell of an adventure, one that's made me love the world of comics more than ever. I'm confident that it's going to be one hell of a good movie."

Paramount Pictures



Ring 2, *Dark Water*, and *The Grudge*.

The Uninvited centers on two sisters: Emily Browning (*Lemony Snicket's A Series of Unfortunate Events*) plays Anna and Ariell Kebbel (*Aquamarine*) plays Alex. After the death of their mother, Anna is institutionalized in a psychiatric facility. Eventually, she moves back home to live with Alex and their father Steven (David Straitharn of *The Spiderwick Chronicles*). But they haven't been living alone—someone else has moved into their home: Rachel (Elizabeth Banks of *Definitely, Maybe*), who was once hired as Anna's mother's nurse and is now engaged to Anna's father. Soon, her mother's ghost warns Anna that Rachel is up to no good and must be stopped. Anna and her sister must now pass that warning along to their father before it's too late. ❧

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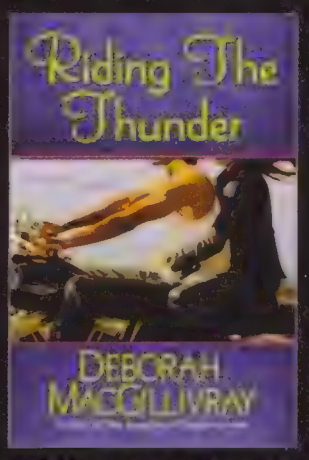

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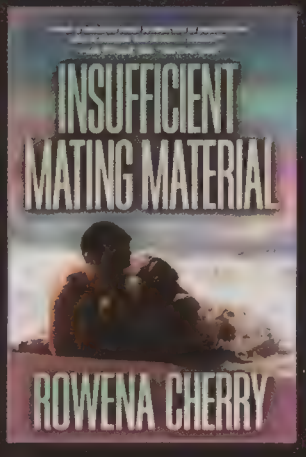
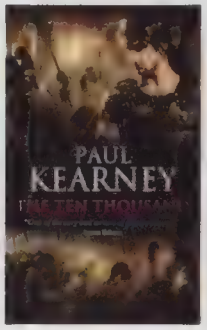


Insufficient Mating Material
Winner of the 2008 Hollywood Book Festival, Romance
Author: Rowena Cherry
www.rowenacherry.com

Imagination Unrestricted by Reality

By Paul Witcover & Jeff VanderMeer

The Ten Thousand is a moving meditation on honor, heroism, sacrifice, and love.



It's hard to know where to begin singing the praises of Paul Kearney's powerful new novel, ***The Ten Thousand*** (Solaris, New York, mass market, 496 pp., $7.99, ISBN: 978-1-84416-573-5), but size seems as good a place as any. Size matters. In a field where multivolume sagas are the norm, a title like *The Ten Thousand* could easily be mistaken for a page count. So it's refreshing to find a novelist who knows how to get the job done in a single, unbloated book. Yes, an epic fantasy that is also a stand-alone novel! I find it admirable from a moral as well as a literary standpoint. Concision is a virtue, and it's one Kearney possesses in spades. But can a novel of nearly five hundred pages really be called concise? Of course. The question is not how long is this or that particular novel, but how long does it need to be? And *The Ten Thousand* is exactly the right length for its compelling story, which is both a good old-fashioned military saga and a moving meditation on honor, heroism, sacrifice, and love. And though its plot is lifted from the Greek historian Xenophon's Anabasis—which records the ill-fated attempt in 401 BC by Cyrus the Younger to wrest the throne of Persia from his brother, Artaxerxes II, with the aid of ten thousand Greek mercenaries (of whom Xenophon was one)—*The Ten Thousand* transcends the mere transposition of historical events into a fantastic setting.

Ted Naifeh created this wonderful illustration for the cover of The Good Neighbors, Book One: Kin. *See the review on page 20.*

The Macht are a free, proud, warlike people whose independent cities, scattered around the severe and inhospitable northern landscape of the Harukush Mountains, are constantly in conflict with each other. Citizen-soldiers, augmented by mercenary companies, pursue agendas of conquest and vengeance. Kearney's model is the squabbling city-states of ancient Greece, but it's as if those city-states were all Spartas. Though no single Macht city has been able to completely dominate the others, cultural and racial—tribal—unity does exist.

To the south, separated from the lands of the Macht by a narrow channel between two seas, is a vast landmass ruled with an iron fist by the Asurian Empire. The empire encompasses diverse environments and races. The Kefren are a tall, beautiful, golden-skinned, violet-eyed race that in cruelty, arrogance, and decadence suggest Moorcock's Melnibonéans; there are also somewhat smaller and physically grosser races that appear to be related to the ruling Kefren—close enough, at least, to interbreed. While the docile, cowlike Juthan, who serve the Kefren as slaves, seem a different species altogether. The descriptions of the Macht make them appear to be recognizably human—yet they, too, can interbreed with the Kefren; one mystery among many.

As noted, Kearney cribs his plot from Xenophon, and he doesn't depart from it in any significant respect (that's not a criticism; plenty of writers have been drawn to this remarkable piece of history). The Macht mercenary army, hired by the Kefren pretender, Arkamenes, rolls with scant opposition deep into the heart of the empire, where at last a pitched battle is fought against the army of the High King,

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DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

Ashurnan. There disaster befalls the invaders, and the vastly outnumbered but never outfought Macht army finds itself cut off in the midst of its enemies. Surrender is not an option, as Ashurnan shows himself ill disposed toward mercy, so the Macht have only one choice: to fight their way out, retracing their steps across hostile territory. This, with stubborn bravery and discipline, they proceed to do ... in a series of set-piece battles that are small masterpieces of their kind.

Kearney makes this story his own with rigorous world-building and full-bodied characterization. Kuf, the world in which the novel is set, is unique not only in its variety of sentient races but in the variety of possible origins for them. Did these races naturally evolve? Were they fashioned by gods? Engineered by science? In place of answers, Kearney provides myths, legends, mysteries with tantalizing clues but no outright solutions. There's a

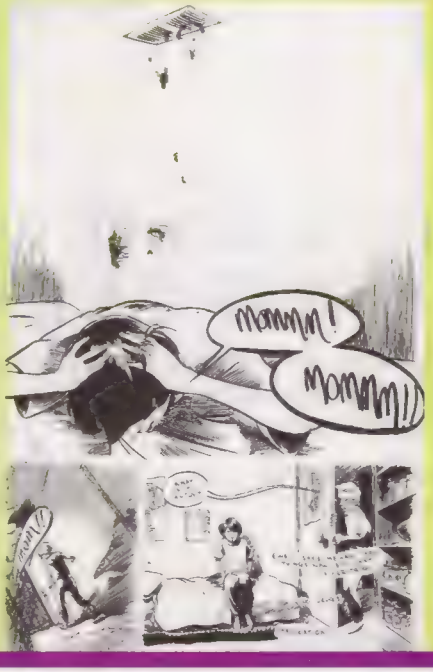
GRAPHIC NOVEL REVIEWS

BY JEFF VANDERMEER

The Good Neighbors, Book One: Kin, Holly Black and Ted Naifeh, Scholastic, New York, NY, hardcover, pp. 118, $16.99, ISBN: 978-0-439-85562-4. The co-creator of the *Spiderwick Chronicles*, Holly Black, ventures into graphic novel territory with *The Good Neighbors* series. Teen Rue Silver must solve the mystery of her family's past when her mother disappears and her father is suspected of murder. It turns out Rue's mother is a faerie, and she isn't dead—she's just been sucked back into the faerie realm because of a promise she once made. Of course, Rue must go into the faerie realm to rescue her mother, which leads to all kinds of complications. The basic situation set out in this new series may seem familiar, but the plot is complex and satisfying. The dialog and progression of scenes that Black has laid out here promises a lot of narrative pay-offs as the series progresses. Ted Naifeh's artwork is detailed and atmospheric, with an air of sophistication that suits the material. I really wasn't sure if *The Good Neighbors* would be for me when I started, but by the end I'd been won over.

The Invisible Man, by H.G. Wells, adapted by Rick Geary, Papercutz Classics Illustrated, New York, hardcover, 110 pp., $9.95, ISBN: 978-1-59707-106-2. You may be more familiar with Rick Geary from his work reviving the rather surreal *Gumby* comic series. He's also won an Eisner and produced the incredible nine-volume *Treasury of Victorian Murder*. Now he's set his sights on a classic by Wells, with good results. His art style is somewhere between realistic and cartoonish, meaning that his take on *The Invisible Man* has to be both serious and humorous. The color scheme, with its pastels verging on something darker support this approach. And there's a clarity to his compositions that pleases the eye. If I have a criticism, it's that this version doesn't tell the whole story of the titular character and at times it seems a little slight as a result. But for kids who haven't read the original, this invisible man will do just fine.

Swallow Me Whole, Nate Powell, Top Shelf, Marietta, GA, hardcover, 216 pp., $20.95, ISBN: 978-1-60309-033-9. What do insect armies, animal telepathy, schizophrenia, and terminal illness have to do with a hallucinogenic love story? Do I have to spell it out for you? Okay, maybe I do. Eisner-nominated Nate Powell's *Swallow Me Whole* follows the trials and tribulations of a brother and sister whose grandmother is in the hospital. Instead of portraying their lives in a normal way, Powell turns to the surreal, bending back the edges of fantasy to get at a more fulfilling psychological reality. Powell's moody, somewhat minimal style serves his material well. I wouldn't say this is the most uplifting read ever, but it should satisfy anyone who likes three-dimensional characters, original situations, and, er, well, armies of insects.



From the Shadow of the Northern Lights: An Anthology of Swedish Alternative Comics, Johannes Klennel, editor, Top Shelf, Marietta, GA, hardcover, 200 pp., $20.00, ISBN: 978-1-60309-011-7. Okay, so I'm going out on a limb with this one, dear readers, but trust me—this is good stuff. Back in the 1970s, the Swedish magazine *Galago* started publishing a series of comics inspired by Robert Crumb, *MAD Magazine*, and Ingmar Bergman. Yes, you read that correctly. Crumb, *MAD*, and Bergman. Many of these comics were political or satirical, but also darkly surreal. From the Jim Woodring-like domestic adventures of a family of stylized rabbits to weird flying cats, you'll find the alternative press embracing fantasy. Translated into English for the first time, these short strips make a compelling argument for the importance of the current Swedish comics scene—it is certainly as interesting as any American equivalent, sometimes more so. As you might guess from the influences, this book isn't for kids, as it is at times raw and uncompromising. But if you're not a kid, you'll find much in this volume to fascinate you. ❧

wonderfully exuberant sense of possibility in these pages, as if any of these explanations, or all of them, or none, could be true. Kearney utilizes names and physical details to similar effect; for instance, Kuf has two moons: Phobos and Haukos. Is this supposed to be an evocation of Mars, with all the warlike associations pertaining thereto? Or is Kuf a Mars that has been terraformed, the Mars of a distant future? Similarly, the Macht possess as many as six thousand sets of unusual black armor; the armor is known as Antimone's Curse, after the tutelary goddess of the Macht, and its properties are extraordinary: indestructible, feather-light, and, most amazingly, able to fit itself precisely to the body of whoever wears it. Is the armor some kind of space-age battle suit, an advanced technology indistinguishable from magic? Or is it just plain magic? Again, what's important to Kearney is not to narrow possibilities by providing answers but to expand them by raising questions. In this, he is skillfully evoking a particular atmosphere, a fertile timelessness redolent of the work of Howard, Burroughs, Moorcock, and other masters of the fantastic. It's a familiar effect, but the particulars are fresh and inspired.

As deftly as Kearney evokes this strange and mysterious world that is also instantly, deeply, recognizable, he's even better when he narrows his focus to individual characters. There are five of particular importance. Rictus, a young Macht warrior who will come of age in the course of the novel; Jason, another Macht, older than Rictus, who finds himself thrust into a position of responsibility he did not seek and does not want yet will not shirk from; Tiryn, a Kefren female, the concubine of Arkamenes, who is both attracted and repelled by the savage Macht, who seem little more than animals to her refined sensibilities; Ashurnan, the High King, a callow youth who must learn to be an effective king; and Vorus, an exiled Macht who has risen to command armies in the service of Ashurnan's father and now serves a son whose leadership qualities he is unsure of. Even more than is usually the case in fiction, Kearney's characters are defined by their conflicted relationships with each other; it's almost better to think not of individuals but of character pairs bound, willingly or not, by messy emotions and perceptions of duty. Rictus and Jason; Jason and Tiryn; Vorus and Ashurnan—Kearney harnesses his historically appropriated plot to these fraught relationships, and they prove to be potent engines, driving the narrative forward to a climax of stark violence and wrenching tragedy. Xenophon would be proud.

In *The Anvil of the World,* Kage Baker, a writer best known for science fiction, showed that she was no slouch when it came to fantasy. One of the chief delights of that witty yet weighty novel was the character of Lord Ermenwyr, the foppish offspring of a demon and an angel. I guess opposites really do

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attract! Now Baker relates that unlikeliest of love stories in ***The House of the Stag*** (Tor, New York, hardcover, 352 pp., $24.95, ISBN: 978-0-7653-1745-2). It's a worthy prequel, but quite different in tone from its predecessor; the glittery frosting of farce that made *Anvil* such a fun read is largely absent from these pages. The darkness hiding at the heart of that novel is right on the surface of this one.

Gard is a half-demon foundling raised by the Yendri, a peaceful tribe of hunter-gatherers. But the placid existence of the Yendri is upended when the brutal Riders invade their lands, killing, raping, and enslaving. A few Yendri escape into the dense forests and high mountains, Gard's foster family among them. There a prophet of sorts arises, the Star, a wonder-worker who learns to travel invisibly into the heart of the Rider villages to bring healing and succor to the slaves. But the Star will not use his magic to fight the Riders directly. When Gard grows to young manhood, he alone among the Yendri begins to hunt and kill their oppressors.

This leads eventually to a tragedy and to his banishment. And in his banishment, as Gard attempts to pass over the great mountains that wall away the rest of the world, he slips and falls ... and finds himself a prisoner in another world: a domain hollowed out of a mountain, where sorcerers who once sought to tap into mystic energies were themselves trapped, and who now live lives of inbred decadence, attended by enslaved demons and others unfortunate enough to have wandered within their reach. Gard—or Slave 4372301, as he is now known—has but one advantage here: he doesn't know his true name. And because he doesn't know it, his captors cannot learn it, and because they cannot learn it, they cannot truly enslave him. Slowly, over many years, Gard learns to harness his own inborn magical potential, harnessing it to his demonic abilities, while earning a reputation as a peerless arena fighter in the blood combats staged for the delectation of the masters.

He becomes a living weapon, dedicated to winning his own freedom and gaining revenge against all who have opposed him.

Meanwhile, among the Yendri, a baby girl is found—another foundling, like Gard. Only she is the one whose coming has long been prophesied by the Star: the one who will free the Yendri and lead them to safety. This infant, called the Saint, grows to beauteous young womanhood and does indeed lead her people out of bondage. But in doing so, she brings them into contact with the wider world, a world less stark and more ambiguous than they are used to. It also brings them into contact with the vengeful Gard and his followers, for in the meantime he has escaped from beneath the Mountain. The course of true love may never run smooth, but it's hard to imagine a rougher course than that which ensues between the demon and the Saint. Indeed, some readers may find it repellent.

It's in the sections of the novel set beneath

NEW YOUNG ADULT FANTASY BOOKS

BY MICHAEL JONES

Hell Week, by Rosemary Clement-Moore, Delacorte Press, August 2008. Daring girl reporter Maggie Quinn is back, and this time she's going undercover as a sorority pledge, writing a series of articles for the Bedivere University newspaper as part of her attempt to become the first freshman ever to get a staff position there. When she's tapped by the exclusive Sigma Alpha Xi sorority, she figures she'll learn the secret of their success. But then her psychic powers kick into overdrive. Unable to leave a mystery well enough alone, Maggie is quickly drawn into a web of danger, manipulation, and Evil Magic. Will her Hell Week be literal? Combining the best parts of Buffy and Nancy Drew, *Hell Week* is a fast-paced, wholly enjoyable tale, taking the somewhat-familiar concept of sorority/fraternity-gone-bad and giving it new life. Score another victory for Maggie Quinn, Girl Versus Evil.

How To Ditch Your Fairy, by Justine Larbalestier, Bloomsbury, September 2008. In the world of New Avalon, almost everyone has an invisible personal fairy to help them in some aspect of their lives. To her dismay, Charlie Steele's fairy helps her find the perfect parking spot, which makes her popular with those who have cars, but otherwise does her no good at all. She'll do anything to get rid of it. Unfortunately, her efforts lead to mischief, misadventures and more demerits than any student deserves. Worse still, once she succeeds in getting a new fairy, she ends up worse than before. What's a girl to do? With its quirky plot, slightly off-kilter setting, and memorable protagonist, this is definitely a book to check out if you need a dose of humor. Thoroughly enjoyable, and deserving of more stories set in this world.

Skinned, by Robin Wasserman, Simon Pulse, September 2008. Following a near-fatal accident, Lia Kahn is saved only through extreme measures: her brain is copied and downloaded into an artificial body. Now she has to relearn how to function, and adjust to her new existence. However, societal prejudice against the so-called skinners leads to rejection and alienation from all sides, leaving Lia caught between the world she's always known, which no longer wants her, and the strange new culture of the skinners, which frightens her. Her attempts to find a place in the world may just lead to tragedy. Captivating, alternately provocative and disturbing, *Skinned* brings up some interesting questions about what makes us human and unique. With its futuristic setting and complex themes, this is the start of a new trilogy that bears further investigation. Fans of Scott Westerfeld, take notice of this one.

Rapunzel's Revenge, by Shannon and Dean Hale and Nathan Hale, Bloomsbury, September 2008. In this extremely entertaining retelling of Rapunzel, the titular character is a feisty, take-no-prisoners girl who uses her extraordinarily long braids as whips, lassos, and ropes. Together with her new friend, the roguish Jack, she sets out to battle the evil witch, Mother Gothel, whose

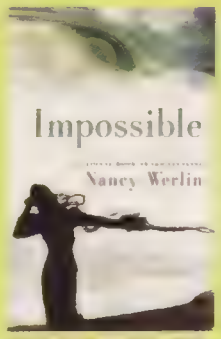
the Mountain, as Gard defeats his enemies with intelligence, cunning, and brute strength, all the while conquering his own basest instincts, that *The House of the Stag* really shines. After that, everything seems rather anticlimactic. But Baker can scarcely be faulted if Gard's portion of the story is more gripping than the Saint's; after all, Milton encountered the same problem when writing about good and evil, and so, for that matter, did Dante.

The British writer K.J. Parker is a mystery. Not only in the obvious sense—that is, the fact that she writes under a pseudonym and her true identity remains unknown. Even more mysterious is why this abundantly talented writer lavishes her gifts on novels that function with all the smooth and horrifying efficiency of mechanized torture devices. Not even Hitchcock at his most sadistically misanthropic can match the diabolical precision with which Parker builds and then sets in motion implacable machines whose sole purpose is to grind her characters down to dust. After reading the *Engineer Trilogy*, which I described in an earlier review for this magazine as a "literary slaughterhouse," albeit "one exceptionally well-designed, even beautiful." I wondered where Parker would go with her next novel, since it seemed to me that she had traveled down this road about as far as she could without producing the literary equivalent of a snuff film. What I hadn't considered until reading ***The Company*** (Orbit, New York, hardcover, 432 pp., $24.99, ISBN: 978-0-316-03853-9) was that Parker might want to do exactly that. This is one of the bleakest books you will ever read, so unremittingly grim and sour in its view of human nature that—despite the high quality of the prose—I feel confident many readers won't even make it to the end, and of those who do, a sizable number will feel as if an implicit contract between writer and reader has been violated. I know I felt that way.

Briefly, what is this contract? Is it that everyone must live happily ever after? That there can be no tragedy, no unfairness, no brutality? Nothing shocking or upsetting? Obviously not. But I think writers have to play fair with readers, and that means they shouldn't take mean advantage of a reader's natural instinct to empathize with fictional characters. A writer shouldn't abuse a reader's trust just for the sake of doing it, simply because she can, like Lucy inviting Charlie Brown to kick that football only to pull it away at the last second. Do that enough times, and even Charlie Brown will stop trying to kick the football. And readers will stop buying books, no matter how well written they may be. That said, Parker can write what she pleases, and it clearly pleases her, at least for now, to write snuff novels.

It's not clear if *The Company* is set in the same world as the *Engineer Trilogy*, but there are some indications that it is, and even if it isn't, it's a world that is very similar in terms of technology, culture, and the utter absence

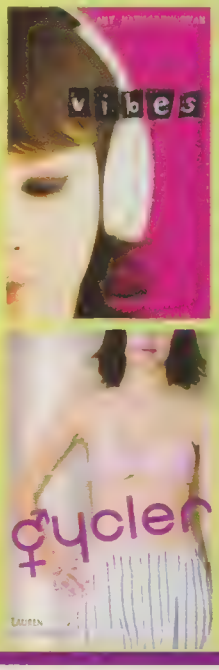
crimes include terrorizing the landscape, enslaving the locals, and imprisoning Rapunzel in a magic tree for years. Along the way, they'll battle all sorts of ruffians and dangers, become the best of friends, and maybe even find Rapunzel's real mother. Skillfully told by Shannon and Dean Hale, *Rapunzel's Revenge* is a graphic novel brilliantly illustrated and brought to life by Nathan Hale, making for a lovely, pseudo-Wild West version of an classic fairy tale. This is not to be missed.



Impossible, by Nancy Werlin, Dial, September 2008. At the age of seventeen, Lucy Scarborough becomes the latest woman in her family to fall victim to a centuries-old curse laid down upon them by an Elfin Knight. Now she has less than nine months—until her own daughter is born—to perform three impossible tasks, or else she'll go mad, just like her mother and grandmother before her. Can Lucy succeed where previous generations have failed, even with the help of her friends and family? Inspired by the ballad "Scarborough Fair," *Impossible* is an intriguing blend of romance and fantasy that doesn't hesitate to touch upon serious issues such as rape and teen pregnancy. While it's an excellent, compelling story, it has a few pacing problems, and the subject matter may not be appropriate for all.

Cybele's Secret, by Juliet Marillier, Alfred A. Knopf, September 2008. When scholarly Paula travels to Istanbul with her merchant father to help him negotiate the purchase of a legendary religious artifact known as Cybele's Gift, she's drawn into a series of adventures influenced by the magical beings of the Otherworld. Along the way, she encounters a handsome bodyguard searching for his lost brother, a dashing pirate on a mysterious quest of his own, and a renowned female scholar who defies custom and expectations. Everyone wants the artifact for its power, and death awaits the losers. This is a richly detailed historical fantasy, full of wonder, mystery, magic and romance, with a fast-paced plot and a thoroughly enjoyable heroine at its heart. Marillier is a master storyteller, and it shows in this companion to *Wildwood Dancing*.

Vibes, by Amy Kathleen Ryan, Houghton Mifflin, September 2008. Kristi has a secret almost no one knows: she can hear thoughts. As she uses this ability to get through the day, she struggles with a variety of issues related to her self-image, her absentee father and workaholic mother, her lack of a love life, and the alternative high school she's forced to attend. Unfortunately, just because she knows what people are thinking doesn't mean she understands them, or herself, leading to confrontations with a number of people. A quirky book with a decidedly memorable heroine, *Vibes* is a quick read with a pleasant, if sometimes awkward voice. It feels real, and the characters are believably layered and flawed, making for a fun read.



Cycler, by Lauren McLaughlin, Random House, August 2008 Jill McTeague suffers from a unique condition, in which she transforms into a teenage boy for four days of every month. As Jill, she enjoys a fairly ordinary life, yearning for a prom date and freedom from her bizarre circumstance. As Jack, he stays locked in the bedroom for the duration, a dirty little secret known only to Jill's parents. But Jack's growing rebellious and stronger with every transformation. Can Jack and Jill find some sort of balance, even as they both struggle with teen hormones and conflicting desires? An intriguing book, *Cycler* sets up a fascinating premise and populates it with memorable characters. Unfortunately, it ends just as things are truly getting interesting, leaving room for a sequel. Regardless, it's a thought-provoking exploration about identity, sexuality, and gender differences. ❧

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of magic. Where the *Engineer Trilogy* traced the course of a great war, *The Company* is concerned with the peace that comes after war—or, rather, whether there is such a thing as peace at all. The story concerns five veterans, boyhood chums from the same village who served as line-breakers, the most dangerous and thankless duty in the army. Now, some years after the war, General Teuche Kunessin has resigned his commission and returned to his hometown in order to put a proposal to his four comrades, whom he hasn't seen since the end of hostilities. He wants the five of them to start a new life on an abandoned island the ownership of which he's managed to have signed over to him by quasi-legal means. The four chums—Kudei Gaeon, Thouridos "Fly" Alces, Muri Achaiois, and Aidi Proiapsen (a fifth, Nuctos Di'Ambrosies, died late in the war)—haven't seen much of each other either, even though they live in and around the town. They've spent their time doddering along, not accomplishing much of anything, with the exception of Aidi, who's become a prosperous merchant, and Fly, who's gotten married. But now the group of friends—frenemies might be more accurate—agree to the proposal of their old commander at once, with certain amendments. Chief among these is the necessity of securing wives for the four unmarried chums. This is done in short order by means of a traditional matchmaking service, although because of time constraints the brides-to-be are in various cases lacking in brains, looks, temperament, and—ominously—sanity. As in the *Engineer* books, women play a subsidiary role; they seem to be bit players even in their own lives, and the sole woman with any degree of agency is a stereotypical psychopath.

Once the group reaches the island—after a difficult sea crossing—and sets to work establishing living quarters and a farm with the assistance of indentured servants, Teuche discovers that his meticulous plans have not taken into account such imponderables as the weather, geology, or human resentments and secrets. The latter two especially begin to undermine a unity that is already far weaker than any of the men suspect. Secrets of old betrayals in the war threaten to surface, while new jealousies arise involving wives and servants, all exacerbated by a fortunate—or unfortunate, depending on your point of view—discovery on the island. All of this is set forth with Parker's customary efficiency and seductive dark humor.

Readers of the *Engineer Trilogy* will be somewhat prepared for what now occurs, but new readers will likely be aghast as the pitiless killing machine of Parker's sharp-toothed narrative engages, chewing up guilty and innocent alike. There's precious little left by the time it's done.

Has it really been five years since the pub-

lication of *The Thackery T. Lambshead Pocket Guide to Eccentric & Discredited Diseases?* That delightfully weird and witty compendium, edited by literary pranksters Jeff VanderMeer and Mark Roberts, read like a demented collaboration between Vladimir Nabokov and Monty Python. Now comes a book cut very much from the same motley: ***A Field Guide to Surreal Botany*** (Two Cranes Press, Singapore, trade paperback, 76 pp., $12.00, ISBN: 978-981-08-1017-7), edited by Janet Chui and Jason Erik Lundberg, with illustrations by Janet Chui.

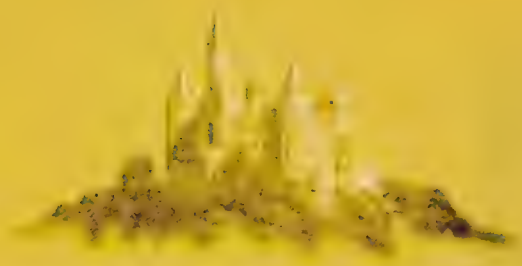
One of the attractions of *Lambshead* was a stellar list of contributors that included some of the top names in speculative fiction. *Surreal Botany* is a more modest project in this regard, but though its forty-eight entries may stem from less familiar sources, the general quality is high.

Couch Kelp, for instance, so called because of its distinctive inflated bladder, may make a beach vacation more comfortable, yet the floating plant, as Jonathan Wonham warns in his comprehensive entry, "can harbour unpleasant and/or exploitive creatures." The Time Cactus, a desert dweller, lives for millions of years yet blooms but once a decade, a flowering that coincides, notes researcher Christopher M. Cevasco, with the "formation of a narrow wormhole" that can permit an observer to look back in time. And the Giant Cloud Lily, reports Patricia L. Havis, can spend its entire life cycle without touching the ground, and is often mistaken for a cloud; in fact, now that I know what to look for, I have seen countless examples of this species myself.

Here is a book equally at home on the bedside table and—for those of a more adventurous bent—in the backpack; happily, the editors have provided a blank page for field notes.

I love chapbooks, those cheaply produced, inexpensively priced zinelike offerings of small presses whose raison d'être is love, not money. Too short for a regular book, too long for a magazine, the chapbook occupies a twilight zone in the publishing world. Chapbooks have a reputation for difficult or experimental work, the kind of stuff mainstream editors may admire in their literary heart of hearts but cannot persuade the bean-counters to acquire. But while there is an element of truth to this stereotype, it falls short of reality. Smart editors pay as much or more attention to chapbooks as they do to agented manuscripts. And the reason why is plain to see in ***Psychological Methods To Sell Should Be Destroyed*** (the title is from a song by the influential punk band The Minutemen), a chapbook of six strong new stories by Robert Freeman Wexler (Spilt Milk Press, Iowa, 80 pp., $5.00, www.electricvelocipede.com).

The choice of World Fantasy Award winner Zoran Zivkovic to introduce these stories



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is apt, because Wexler's fiction shares the wry surrealism and dreamlike paranoia for which Zivkovic is known. But there's sometimes a chilliness at the heart of Zivkovic's work: I can feel at a remove from the action and the characters, observing the working out of a logical puzzle that has been devised with great ingenuity by the author. Wexler, by contrast, builds his stories around flesh-and-blood people, human beings who, amid their bizarre surroundings and off-kilter circumstances, engage our feelings as well as our intellects.

Four of the stories are a kind of suite, taking place in or around New York's Little Italy neighborhood. In "Suspension," a four-armed man slips on an icy sidewalk and tumbles to the ground, a fallen angel, his mind drifting between snowflakes. "Tales of the Golden Legend" features a young man who discovers that bread is sentient and speaks in a language of its own. In "The Green Wall," another young man, trapped in a dead-end job at a failing art gallery, gazes with fevered longing at jungle images that have mysteriously appeared on the wall outside his apartment windows. While in "Indifference," a man mourning the failure of his marriage finds his existence altered when a disembodied head appears in his living room. Subtle details link these stories, but what they really share is a theme of sad, nostalgic hopelessness giving way to the possibility of something different if not necessarily better.

The final story in the collection, "The Sidewalk Factory: A Municipal Romance," carries this theme further than the others. It is a dystopian satire that skewers the absurdities and cruelties of the present U.S. administration while serving up a love story between a nameless bureaucrat and the captain of a merchant ship. It is hopeful, but at the same time elegiac, as if the author were bidding an old lover a last goodbye.

These are not stories of grand awakenings but of small epiphanies. They are as much about disenchantment as they are about enchantment. And they are funnier than you might think, especially "Tales of the Golden Legend," which features such sage advice as "We can't always do what bread says." How true!

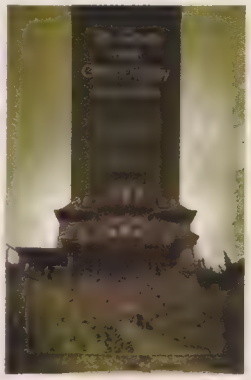
Paul Witcover

Mr. Gaunt & Other Uneasy Encounters, John Langan, Prime Books, Rockville, MD, hardcover, 288 pp., $24.95, ISBN: 978-0-8095-7249-6.

John Langan's short fiction has been garnering huge amounts of praise for the last few years, and this collection of long stories should only result in more praise, along with awards consideration. Langan's gift is to know the tropes of the dark fantasy field intimately, and then to go about subverting them like some kind of spy in the house of literature. Langan can at times be too intellectual or too experimental, but usually he is a precise and interesting artist, renovating or ripping up the floorboards of contemporary horror. This collection includes five novellas or novelettes—many of which first appeared in *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*—with highlights such as the award-nominated tales "On Skua Island," "Mr. Gaunt," and "Tutorial." However, the real treasure here is the original novella "Laocoon or The Singularity," which concerns an artist discovering a mysterious statue. Langan manages to mix a kind of comfortable familiarity more common to Stephen King with something deeply strange. As an added perk, Prime is releasing this potentially landmark collection in a gorgeous hardcover edition.

The Engine's Child, Holly Phillips, Del Rey, New York, NY, 384 pp., trade paper, $15.00, ISBN 978-0-345-49965-3.

Holly Phillips created a stir with her first book, a vaunted collection called *The Palace of Repose*. She then dropped off of the map with her first novel, *The Burning Girl*, so it's good to see her second novel out from Del Rey, with appropriate publicity. Phillips is one of those stylists who can be lush or transparent, and can convey a remarkable amount of emotional intensity in a very short space. She can do traditional fantasy or work with more daring material. How is she at novel length? Mysterious and interesting. In *The Engine's Child*, an island of exiles who fled a mainland ruined by both magic and technology seeks some kind of reconciliation. Within the complex world of the island of Rasnan, a power struggle occurs with those who prefer isolation or new lands entirely. The novice Moth must navigate this web of intrigue even as her island may be threatened irrevocably by the outside world. *The Engine's Child* contains many of Phillips's signatures: attention to the details of both setting and character, an essential strangeness, and emotional empathy. Moth is a compelling character who, on the whole, does a good job of carrying the weight of the novel.



Desideria, Nicole Kornher-Stace, Prime Books, Rockville, MD, trade paperback, 364 pp., $17.95, ISBN: 978-0-8095-7337-0.

A relatively new writer whose short fiction has been reprinted by *Best American Fantasy*, among others, Nicole Kornher-Stace tends toward the experimental, which is great for fantasy

fans looking for something a little different. With her first novel, *Desideria*, she's created an intriguing, sometimes overlong mystery/psychological drama in which a woman named Ange St Loup wakes up in a madhouse, her memory in ruins. Her face is mutilated and she was found beside a burning building. Is she a murderer? Is she insane? As she tries to regain control of her life, she must find out what happened that night, the implications of which become broader and broader. Kornher-Stace tells the story in often hallucinogenic prose, including asides that sing with true poetry. The setting is an imaginary city, but in a more contemporary/realistic mode than in most fantasies. It's unlikely you'll read a more unusual novel this year.

The Domino Men, Jonathan Barnes, William Morrow, New York, NY, hardcover, 400 pp., $24.95, ISBN: 978-0-06-167140-1.

Jonathan Barnes's first novel, *The Somnabulist,* divided reviewers, with some accusing him of doing steampunk pastiche and others recognizing a ripping good yarn when they saw it. Now, with his second novel, *The Domino Men,* Barnes ventures into new territory, which includes deals with the Devil for the souls of everyone in London, spy games, and all kinds of other oddities. Into this melange of strangeness steps filing clerk Henry Lamb, a reluctant yet sure-footed narrator. As Barnes piles on absurdity after absurdity, craziness on craziness, you begin to sense the glee Barnes got out of creating this yarn. To get a sense of how wonderfully twisted this novel is, here's the beginning of Chapter 10: "Floating in amniotic fluid with only his trunks to protect his wrinkled modesty, Dedlock glowered at me from within his glass sarcophagus." There are many intriguing lines like that one in *The Domino Men,* which often reads like an entertaining remix of Alan Moore and Mike Mignola in book form. It's been a while since I had such fun reading a novel.

Things We Think About Games, Will Hindmarch and Jeff Tidball, Gameplaywright Press, Roseville, MN, trade paperback, 160 pp., $20.00, ISBN: 978-0-9818840-0-4.

Although not fiction, the wonderful *Things We Think About Games* ought to be required reading for any fantasy fan. In its often Zen-like insights about gaming, you can see both the seeds of fiction and a holy but productive nostalgia for the days when we all played *D&D.* Ably assisted by a number of other gaming professionals, Hindmarch and Tidball provide 140 insights into game theory and practice. Each insight consists of a heading and then explanation, some of which are quite funny. For example: "Clip your goddamn fingernails: In all games covered by this book, you spend a great deal of time manipulating things with your fingers. So it stands to reason that people will be looking at your hands a lot. Do 'em a solid and make your fingernails presentable, for the love of god." And then some contain the explanation in the title, like "You cannot convince someone who is not having fun that he is." Of course, there's also serious discussion of gaming, from pieces about game "omnivores" to naming characters to packaging and rules. But it's all in a wider context of use to more than just players of games.

Jeff VanderMeer

By Stephen D. Winick

In riddling, the questions of life and death are worked out in word and metaphor.

"When first I appear, I seem mysterious, but when I'm explained, I'm nothing serious." So runs a Jamaican riddle, the solution to which is "riddle."

Sadly, "nothing serious" more or less agrees with many people's view of the riddle. For many, a riddle is just a joke phrased in the form of a question. Such a question calls for immediate surrender, so that the teller can get to the punchline:

"Why did the moron throw the clock out the window?"

"I don't know, why?"

"He wanted to see time fly."

This approach ignores much of the mystery and majesty of traditional riddles, and even some of their whimsy. A real riddle invites the answerer to puzzle it out, to work on it, to think. And whatever modern people may think of this venerable genre, riddles are very serious business, especially in the realms of mythic fantasy. They crop up at crucial moments of crisis, prophecy, and transition, marking a character's transformation from child to adult, single to married, living to dead.

Illustration © 1997 by Alan Lee

Gollum pesters Bilbo Baggins for one more riddle in Alan Lee's illustration for the 60th anniversary edition of The Hobbit.

For evidence, one need look no further than the first meeting between a Hobbit and a Ring of Power. In Tolkien's *The Hobbit,* what is surely the most momentous occasion in Bilbo Baggins's life is marked by a riddling session. In the crucial chapter "Riddles in the Dark," Bilbo finds an ordinary looking ring and puts it in his pocket. He then encounters the creature Gollum and agrees to a riddling contest. If Bilbo wins, Gollum will show him the way out of the network of caves he has stumbled into. If Bilbo loses, Gollum will kill him and eat him. The two match wits in riddles, until, in desperation, Bilbo asks a riddle that is not a riddle: "What have I got in my pocket?"

With this unanswerable question, Bilbo wins the contest. Indeed, he wins even though he is cheating, for both he and Gollum comment on the fact that the question is not, in Gollum's words, "a fair question ... not a riddle, precious, no." Yet, as Tolkien's narration also tells us, "the riddle-game was sacred and of immense antiquity, and even wicked creatures were afraid to cheat when they played at it."

What does all this mean? To whom is such a game sacred, and how ancient is it? And how does Gollum figure that Bilbo's last question wasn't a riddle?

To answer the last question first, a riddle is a tricky description whose referent must be guessed. Equally important, the referent must be *guessable.* This means that the answer must be retrievable from the text of the riddle itself, and the shared knowledge of the participants.

Let's start with an example, one of Gollum's riddles:

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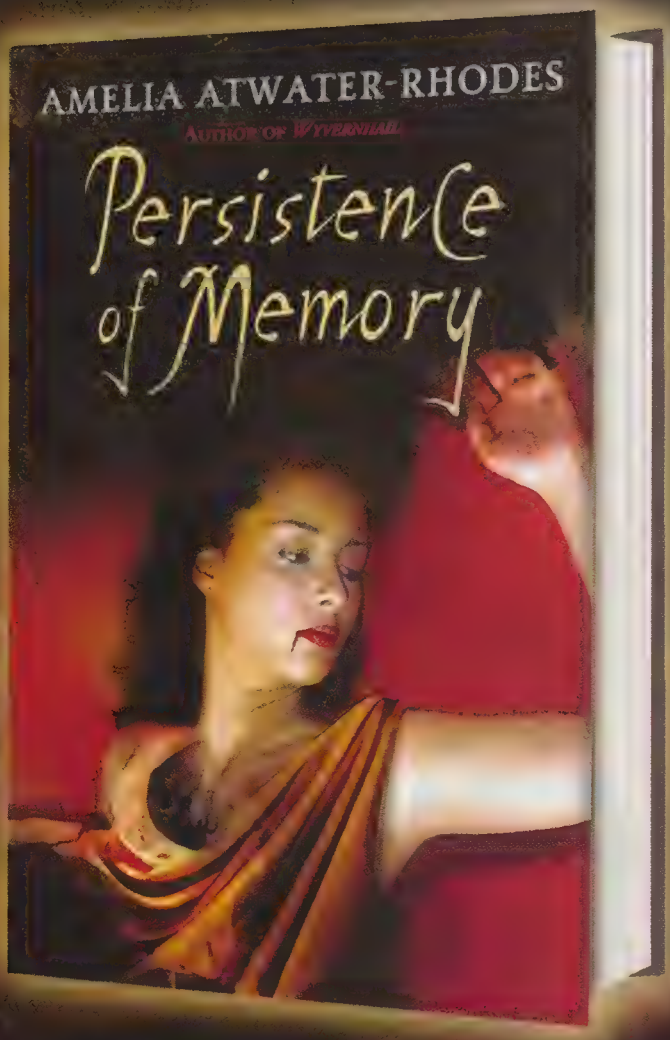

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The answer, of course, is "fish." Tolkien notes that it was easy for Gollum, who lived on a diet of fish, but "it was a poser for poor Bilbo, who never had anything to do with the water if he could help it."

Despite Gollum's cultural advantage as a quasi-aquatic fish-eater, Bilbo is ultimately able to guess the answer. Imagine, though, if the question were asked of a person from another culture entirely, say a Bushman of the southern African desert, whose daily experience does not include fish (or, for that matter, shirts of mail). For him, this riddle would be unanswerable, and to ask it of him would be unfair.

We can now see why "What have I got in my pocket?" is not fair and not a riddle: it cannot be guessed based on the text of the riddle and a shared base of knowledge. In fact, no one except Bilbo, who asks it, has the knowledge needed to guess it.

This kind of false or unfair riddle is an old motif in folklore and saga-literature. Tolkien's sources for the riddle-contest include two from Norse mythology, the *Vaf-rú-nismál* of the elder Edda, and the *Saga of King Heidrek the Wise*. In each of these tales, Odin engages in a riddle contest while in disguise. To finish the contest, he asks, "What did Odin whisper in Baldr's ear before Baldr was raised onto his funeral pyre?" No one overheard Odin whispering in the ear of his dead son. So, like Bilbo asking about his own pocket, Odin himself is the only one who can possibly know the answer. In both tales, the answerer realizes at this point that his opponent is Odin himself; Vaf-rú-nir concedes defeat, but Heidrek accuses Odin of cowardice and attacks him with his sword. Tolkien blends the two endings, making Gollum acquiesce at first, then physically attack Bilbo for his unfair riddle.

Folklore and literature provide many variations on the false-riddle theme. One traditional English version runs: "Love I sit, Love I stand, Love I wear on my right hand." The solution is that the riddler once had a dog named Love. When Love died, the man made from his fur a cushion to sit on, a pair of slippers to stand in, and a glove for his right hand. Without knowing the convoluted back story, who could hope to guess such a riddle? A similar American riddle-tale features a soldier captured in the Civil War who tells his captors, "Horn ate horn up a white oak tree, you solve this riddle and you can hang me." The solution is that the man's name is Mr. Horn, and the previous evening he killed and cooked a goat, then climbed an oak tree to eat it. Once again, to know the answer, you had to be there. An older traditional example is Samson's riddle from the Hebrew bible: "Out of the eater came something to eat, out of the strong came something sweet" (Judges 14: 14). To solve the riddle, you'd have to know that once, while traveling all alone, Samson found a honeycomb inside the carcass of a lion! The false or cheating riddle of this type obviously has roots in some truly ancient traditions. It is called a "neck riddle" by folklorists, because it is most often used in stories to save the asker's neck—a point to which we'll return soon.

Fair Riddling

Since in a fair contest the answerer possesses the necessary cultural knowledge to guess the riddle, the questioner must often rely on other factors to make his riddles harder. Folklorists have referred to such elements as "blocks." Gollum's first riddle, for example, is:

What has roots as nobody sees,
Is taller than trees.
Up, up it goes,
And yet never grows?

The answer is "mountain." But in what sense does a mountain "go" up? Only in our experience of it—it seems to rise up before us, but does not actually rise. So its "going" is metaphorical, and if we try to think of things that really travel upward, we will fail to guess the riddle. This is a common block in many riddles: it's hard to tell what is literal and what is metaphorical. The fish's coldness is literal, for example, but its "mail" is a metaphorical description of its scales. When trying to guess this riddle, one has to go through each descriptive element and wonder if it is a literal description or a poetic metaphor.

A different kind of block can be seen in the modern riddle "black and white and read all over," whose answer is "newspaper." The block in that riddle is that "read" is a homophone of the color "red," so the riddle seems to be asking for something that is black in some places, white in other places, and red in all places—an impossibility.

Still a third kind of block is introduced when the riddle has more than one possible answer. Some riddles have one answer that is obvious and sexually explicit, and more modest answers that are harder to find. My translation of an Anglo-Saxon riddle of the 10th century runs:

A wonder hanging by the lord's thigh
Under his waist. In its front is a hole.
It is stiff and hard, in proper position;
when the man lifts his garment
over his knee, he wants to greet that well-known hole
With this hanging thing's head ...
to its full depth he has often filled it.

Of course, a sexual solution occurs to most hearers first. "Clean" answers include "key and lock" or "knife and sheath," since either a key or a knife could hang from the belt in the position described. Modern English has plenty of similar riddles. Consider this one: "What sticks out of your pajamas in the morning, so hard you can hang your hat on it?" (The answer, of course, is "your head," which preserves the ambiguity of the question!)

In a formal riddle-contest, either a dirty or a clean answer might be accepted for these riddles. But in social situations, this kind of riddle offers other possibilities. If anyone gives the sexual answer, the riddler can smirk, as if to say "you have a dirty mind," and offer instead the clean one. On the other hand, if a clean answer is offered, the riddler can laugh at his prudishness. These riddles and others like them put into play not only what we know, but what we choose to admit knowing, and to whom.

Another form of knowledge is negotiated by the longstanding tradition of "wisdom questions" or "monk's riddles": these test specialized knowledge of the Bible and other subjects. Such riddles have been extensively used by fantasy authors also, notably Patricia McKillip in her classic series *Riddle-Mas-*

Painting by Johann Heinrich Fussli

ABOVE: The prophecies of the three witches in Shakespeare's Macbeth *prove to be riddles, both solved by Macduff. OPPOSITE: The sphinx kills anyone who cannot answer its riddles.*

ter. Here, the "riddles" are actually questions about great figures of the past, and to be a "riddle-master" entails amassing an encyclopedic knowledge of history. McKillip's riddles, such as "Who was Thanet Moss and why did he play a harp without strings?" are quite different from traditional folk riddles, and from Tolkien's riddles, too. Still, they share a certain characteristic with folk riddles: they are answerable based on a body of knowledge to which both participants have access. Gollum and Bilbo are testing general cultural knowledge; they ask about fish and teeth and darkness and wind, things everyone in Middle-Earth knows about. The Riddle-Masters are asking for specialized historical knowledge that not everyone has, but they also provide an academy where one can learn it. So in both cases, the question is fair because the guesser has a fair chance to know the answer.

Riddle or Die!

Neck riddles, such as the false riddle in *The Hobbit,* and the "Love I sit" and "Horn ate horn" examples, are crucial elements in stories where the riddler faces death if he does not stump his opponent. The riddle-game in which the participant's life is forfeit if he loses is indeed, as Tolkien says, "of immense antiquity," going back to the beginnings of recorded mythology.

The most prominent example, surely, is the Greek myth of Oedipus, in which the tragic hero's first trial is to answer the Sphinx's riddle or be killed. Since the riddles Oedipus solves relate to his fate, it is worthwhile to summarize the tale, with reference to the most famous version, by Sophocles (ca. 496-406 BCE).

Before Oedipus is born to Laius and Jocasta, king and queen of Thebes, it is prophesied that he will murder his father. Laius therefore orders a shepherd to tie the infant's feet together, piercing them with a stake, and leave him to die. The herdsman instead gives him away. Oedipus finally ends up with Polybus, king of Corinth, who adopts him.

Years later, Oedipus hears of the prophecy and flees to avoid killing Polybus, who he thinks is his father. On his way to Thebes, Oedipus encounters a stranger, and kills him in a debate over right-of-way. Continuing to Thebes, he encounters a monster called the Sphinx, who has been forcing all travelers to answer a riddle, killing them when they fail to guess. When Oedipus solves the riddle, the Sphinx kills herself, prompting the Thebans to appoint Oedipus king and give him the widow of the previous king as his wife.

Again, years pass. With his new queen, Oedipus has four children. Finally, a plague comes to Thebes, and the oracles tell Oedipus he must solve the murder of Laius, the previous king. When a messenger arrives with news of Polybus's death, Oedipus finds out that Polybus was not his biological father. Investigating further, he finds the shepherd, who reveals that Oedipus was the child of Laius and Jocasta. In a flash, he realizes that the stranger he killed must have been Laius, and that he has thus not only killed his father but married and had children with his mother. In horror, Oedipus blinds himself and leaves the city.

His story continues, but the initial riddle is what concerns us here. Although it's not in Sophocles's version, tradition holds that the Sphinx's riddle was "What creature goes on four legs in the morning, two legs in the afternoon, and three legs at night?" The answer Oedipus gives is "man," who crawls on all fours when an infant, walks on two legs as an adult, and leans on a staff in old age. The connection to Oedipus is that his feet are deformed due to the injuries inflicted by the shepherd (indeed, the name Oedipus means

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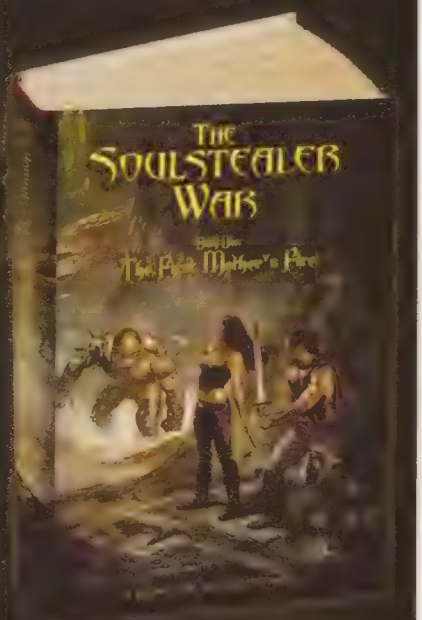

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"swollen-foot"). Like Gollum with the fish riddle, Oedipus has an easy time with this one because he has to think about walking more than most.

The riddle may also, of course, refer to more psychological aspects of Oedipus's character. Jocasta's own observation in Sophocles's play that men often lie with their mothers in their dreams, and that this is not necessarily evil, suggests that the ancient Greeks had a sympathetic understanding of the unconscious and its desires. Since this riddle is about growing up and then growing old, could it be a warning to Oedipus not to get stuck in a juvenile developmental stage, that of unresolved Oedipal desire?

Although the best-known texts of the Oedipus myth include only this one riddle, ancient fragmentary versions, and more recent folktale tellings, suggest that the Sphinx originally posed three stumpers, each of which had some relevance to Oedipus's own story. The riddle of the three stages of man, it seems, was the third and final riddle. The ancient, fragmentary play by Theodectes (ca. 380 to 340 BCE) contains what appears to have been the second riddle: "Two siblings, light and dark. The first begets the second, the second begets the first." The answer, as Oedipus guesses, is "day and night." Like the Anglo-Saxon key riddle, however, this one has an alternative, dirty solution. After all, the only way a person can beget his own sibling is through sex with his own mother, and Oedipus will do just that, begetting four of his own siblings. (It is not a stretch to imagine that ancient Greeks would have seen this second solution, for riddles whose answers refer to incestuous relationships are quite common, even outside the Oedipus myth. One such riddle, for example, sets in motion Shakespeare's play *Pericles*.)

Oral folktale versions of the Oedipus myth supply several alternatives for the first riddle, one of which is particularly interesting: "What is the thing that consumes what it bears? It bears children and then consumes them again?" The answer the hero gives is "the sea," which sends forth waves and then absorbs them again. This image of bearing children and then receiving them again into the maternal body, once again, carries undertones of incest.

Seen in this light, the riddles of the Sphinx combine to form a larger riddle, the riddle of Oedipus's identity. If you fully articulated this larger riddle, it might be: "What has an incestuous mother, begets its own siblings, and needs to develop and move past its Oedipal desires?" (Or, perhaps, "What has an incestuous mother, begets its own siblings, and walks funny?")

Tragically, it is this larger riddle that takes Oedipus a lifetime to solve.

Riddling and Courtship

The Oedipus myth, folklorists say, may have arisen through the combination of two separate folktales: the first about a fulfilled prophecy of parricide and incest, and the second about a hero who must accomplish difficult tasks, such as answering riddles and slaying dragons, to marry a princess (a Persian example, in which the task is a riddle, is the basis of Puccini's opera *Turandot*). Some clever storyteller, noticing that both the parricide and the hero plots center on marriage, synthesized the two to solve the thorny plot point of how Oedipus was going to meet and marry his mother. Both riddle-master and dragonslayer, Oedipus's reward is both the traditional one—a princess bride—and a tragically parodic one: his own dowager queen mother.

More generally, there is a strong association between riddling and courtship in myths and fantasy stories, including many mentioned above. The riddle of Samson occurs in the context of his wedding-feast; he stumps Delilah's countrymen, and, in a foreshadowing of her later betrayal, she wheedles the solution from him and tells it to his opponents. Both *Turandot* and *Pericles* present their riddles in the context of courtship. To give a few more far-flung examples, the queen of Sheba tests Solomon with riddles, and then becomes his lover. Cú Chulainn, the great hero of Irish saga, swaps riddles with his future wife, Emer, during their courtship. Alvíss, a dwarf in the elder Edda, courts Freya by answering a series of wisdom riddles.

Courtship and riddling are linked not only in myth, but in widespread folk traditions, from medieval France to nineteenth-century Russia to the modern Philippines. Why should courtship, marriage, and riddles be linked? For one thing, it's important to find out if a prospective spouse is ready for marriage. Brides and grooms, and their parents and communities, often want to know whether the suitor is smart enough, has wisdom enough, understands the culture well enough, and is respectful enough in interactions, to be a suitable mate. Much of this can be discovered through riddle-contests.

Sometimes, courtship riddles simply test knowledge of the birds and the bees. For example, a traditional ballad, "Captain Wedderburn's Courtship," presents a series of riddles asked back and forth by potential mates. As the great Irish singer Willie Clancy sang it:

"You must get me for my breakfast a cherry without a stone,
You must get me for my dinner a bird without a bone."

These demands are answered as riddles, not tasks; the suitor does not bring a cherry or a bird to the table, but instead answers how the seemingly impossible cherry or bird can exist:

"Now the cherry when in blossom, it surely has no stone,
The chicken when it's in the egg, it surely has no bone."

So far, so good: the riddling has shown that

the participants understand biology. Note, however, how many of the key words in these riddles are also sexual double-entendres: "cherry" and "stone" are slang for "hymen" and "testicle"; the stone within the fruit is a well-known metaphor for pregnancy; "bird" and "chick" have long been slang terms for a pretty girl; "flower" or "blossom" a frequent metaphor for female genitalia; and "bone" likewise for an erection. "Egg," meanwhile, doesn't even need a second meaning to be sexual! Throughout the rest of this ballad, too, items that have sexual connotations (tall trees, horns, dew) crop up in the riddles.

Some riddles that have straight answers in the ballad are found separately in tradition with sexual answers. "What is deeper than the sea?" is answered in the ballad with "Hell," but folklorist Barre Toelken found this riddle in North Carolina with the answer, "Vagina—it can't be fathomed!"

This flurry of sexual innuendo disguised as innocent wordplay culminates in:

"You must get for me some winter fruit
that in December grew,
You must get for me a mantle that weft
nor warp went through."

The ballad's answer to this seemingly impenetrable riddle is equally mystifying:

"Now my father has some winter fruit that
in December grew,
My mother has a mantle that weft nor
warp went through."

On his journey to Thebes, Oedipus meets the Sphinx, who forces all travelers to solve a riddle.

Toelken found that both of these riddles were present in North Carolina tradition; the "fruit" that can grow even in winter is the penis (or sometimes, semen which can "grow" a baby), while the unwoven mantle is a woman's pubic hair. This explains why the former belongs to a father, or mature male, and the latter to a mother, or mature female. Underneath many courtship-riddles, then, we find the general riddle tradition's familiar sexual double-entendres, this time functioning not as the riddle's block but as another part of the test: whether the couple can negotiate riddles about sex is taken as a sign of whether they can negotiate the riddle of sex itself.

Marriage is not all about sex, however, and riddles can also test other principles that are important to successful couplehood. The story of the marriage of Sir Gawain, told in a medieval romance, a minstrel ballad, and one of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales,* is a prime example of this. It connects Gawain's marriage to his successful solution for the riddle "What does a woman want?" The answer, discovered by Gawain and Arthur, is "to have her will." The block here seems to be that the riddle is a tautology; since "her will" literally means "what she wants," the answer simply boils down to "she wants to get what she wants."

Warner Bros. Pictures

A riddle foretells the power struggle between Voldemort and Harry Potter in J.K. Rowling's books. Voldemort began his life as Tom Riddle (above)!

Gawain, however, demonstrates not only that he knows the answer but that he understands it. After he has solved the riddle and married the Lady, she explains that she is under a spell and must be either hideous by day and beautiful by night (so that he will have a happy private life but be pitied and ridiculed in public), or ravishing by day and ugly by night (so that he will be admired by his friends, but unhappy in private). He must choose which option to live with. Gawain puts his money where his mouth is, answering the riddle in deed as well as word: he allows her to make the choice. Because he understands his charge, the spell is broken, and she can be beautiful all the time. Thus, through this great positive reinforcement of riddle, action, and reward, Gawain learns one of the great lessons of a happy marriage: "Whatever you say, dear!"

Can these observations on riddles and courtship have any bearing on Bilbo's riddle-contest with Gollum? Not in a purely literal sense, of course; Bilbo and Gollum do not run off and get married when it's over. But in a deeper sense, there is a connection. The riddle contest ends with Bilbo accepting Gollum's ring, after all, and like a wedding ring, the One Ring binds them together as part of one another's lives until death does them part. Emotionally, Gollum awakens Bilbo's more tender sentiments, pity and mercy (even if he swears for his part to hate Bilbo forever).

Bilbo's successor, Frodo, also wears Gollum's ring. He ends up in something close to a love-triangle with Gollum, and Tolkien described it as such, remarking in one of his letters that Gollum's "dawning love of Frodo was too easily withered by the jealousy of Sam." This jealousy is awakened by the fact that, as another ringbearer, Gollum understands Frodo in a way Sam cannot. In the end, the power of the ring binding Gollum and Frodo causes Gollum to unwittingly supplant Sam as Frodo's helpmeet and other half, when he sacrifices himself in the fires of Mount Doom, and brings "his precious" along. "But for him," Frodo tells Sam, "I could not have destroyed the Ring." Remember, too, that neither Frodo nor Bilbo ever takes a wife; accepting the One Ring apparently precludes them from accepting others. In all these ways, the One Ring acts as a wedding ring, and the riddling of Gollum and Bilbo becomes a strange kind of courtship which binds not only Bilbo but his successor as ringbearer.

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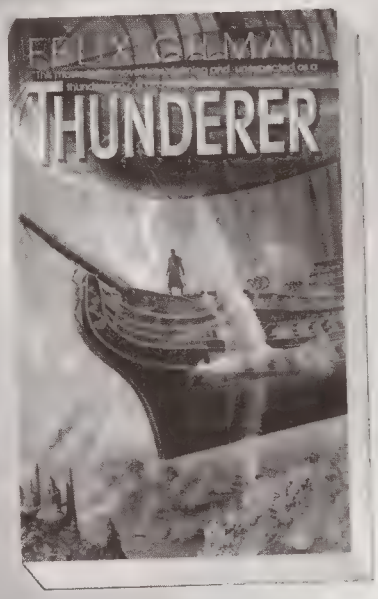

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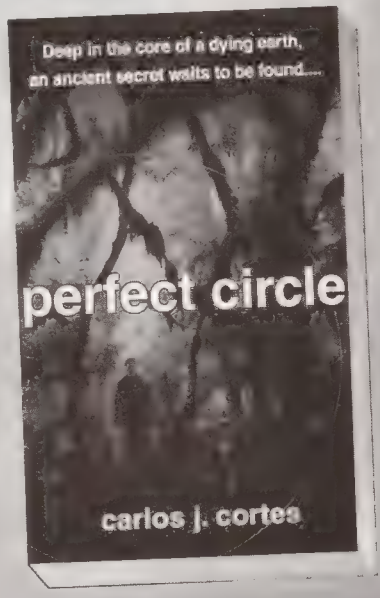

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Riddling and Prophecy

In David Eddings's *Malloreon,* the ancient wizard Beldin exclaims "I hate riddles! They're the entertainment of the preliterate!" Oddly, though, what's gotten him steamed at that point in the story is not an entertaining riddle, but a fateful prophecy.

Throughout literature, folklore, and theology, prophecy is often spoken not in straightforward terms, but in riddling speech. Beldin is far from the first character to express disgust at this tendency; in Sophocles's play, Oedipus becomes angry at the blind seer Teiresias's obscure prophecies, and accuses him of speaking in riddles. Teiresias retorts that Oedipus should not complain, since he is, after all, supposed to be a riddle expert.

Folklorist Tom Mould has pointed out that both prophecy and riddle consist of "implicit question and perplexing description." Nostradamus, for example, wrote that "that which lives but has no senses will cause its own death through artifice." His readers may be forgiven for wondering just what is being predicted. Generally, of course, one cannot solve such prophetic riddles ... until after the prophecy has come true.

Sometimes in prophecy a seemingly impossible situation is described. The hearer takes it to mean the given eventuality will never happen. But, of course, the prophecy is really a riddle, and there IS a solution. So, for example, in Shakespeare's *Macbeth,* the witches prophesy that Macbeth can be harmed by "no man born of woman." He believes this prophecy makes him safe from all men, but in fact he is killed by Macduff, who was delivered by Caesarian section. The witches also prophesy that Macbeth will not be vanquished until Birnam Wood moves to Dunsinane Hill, which Macbeth likewise dismisses as impossible. Again, the prophecy turns out to be a riddle, and again Macduff solves it. The wood moves when Macduff's army, using limbs from Birnam as camouflage, marches to the hill.

These riddles were enshrined in epic fantasy when Tolkien, dissatisfied with their solutions in *Macbeth,* recast them in *The Lord of the Rings.* The Witch-King, Tolkien tells us, can be killed by no man. Naturally, he thinks he is safe when battling an armored knight. But the knight is Eowyn—a woman in a man's armor. So a riddle disguised as a prophecy is solved by a woman disguised as a man, and the Witch-King pays the price for failing to recognize either of them. (As for Birnam Wood, that riddle was the inspiration for the march of the ents.)

One more famous riddle-prophecy has an important place in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings:*

All that is gold does not glitter,
Not all those who wander are lost;
The old that is strong does not wither,
Deep roots are not reached by the frost.

From the ashes a fire shall be woken,
A light from the shadows shall spring;
Renewed shall be blade that was broken,
The crownless again shall be king.

The first four lines are a true riddle, whose solution, of course, is "Aragorn." Each line is a riddling description of the future king: he looks like a poor vagabond, yet is immensely valuable (he is gold but does not glitter); he seems to wander aimlessly but in fact watches for signs of Sauron's return; the ancient blood of Númenór has not lost its strength, and his roots have not been frozen or forgotten. The next four lines are more prophetic, predicting his ascendancy: his emergence from exile, the reforging of his sword, and the reclaiming of his kingdom. Within Tolkien's world, the author of this poem was the riddle-master himself, Bilbo Baggins, and its original title was "The Riddle of Strider."

A more recent example of riddling prophecy foretells the struggle between Voldemort and Harry Potter in J.K. Rowling's bestselling series. During the dark days of Voldemort's first ascendancy, the divination expert Sibyl Trelawney falls into a trance and declaims: "The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches ... born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies... and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal...."

As in many riddles, this one has a "block." Its descriptors fit two different boys from prominent wizarding families: Harry Potter and Neville Longbottom. As is often the case with prophecy, it is the attempt to escape it that makes it come true: Voldemort, in attempting to kill Harry and avoid the prophecy, indicates that he sees Harry as more dangerous than Neville, thus "marking him as his equal." In doing this, he actually makes Harry the subject of the prophecy and opens the door for Harry to destroy him. In this way, Voldemort solves a riddle that for him was best left unsolved. It's interesting to note, too, that Voldemort's original name is as solidly English as Harry's: his birth name is Tom Riddle.

Riddle Round Again

We have answered two of the questions we began with: "Why was Bilbo's question not a riddle?" and "How ancient is the riddle-game, really?" The third question was "To whom is riddling sacred?" The answer turns out to be "everyone." As we have seen, riddles are associated with myths, prophecies, and rituals of maturing, marrying, mating, and dying. During these classic rites of passage, anthropologists tell us, people go through ordeals that remove them from previous cultural categories, and allow them to re-enter their cultures as members of new categories. As Victor Turner states, during these rites "monsters startle neophytes into thinking about objects, persons, relationships and features of their environment that they have hitherto taken for granted."

The riddle, Craig Williamson points out, is a verbal version of this journey. Something as ordinary as a fish becomes a mail-clad, death-cold, breathless drinker. A man becomes a nameless beast that starts with four legs, loses two, and then grows one back. These are monsters indeed, as monstrous as the Sphinx herself, and being startled by them sends riddle-solvers on a quest through the metaphorical system, during which they must ponder their own cultures' systems of thought.

It has been argued that the rite of passage is the heroic deed writ small. Like Prometheus returning with fire, or Hanuman returning with the Dronagiri Mountain, the initiate leaves his culture of established and reified categories and comes back with new and startling truths. And riddling, as we have seen, is the rite of passage writ small, a microcosm of a microcosm where the central questions of life and death are worked out in word and metaphor. In mythic fantasy stories, we see riddling restored to its true meaning: a moment of crucial importance, of power and prophecy, love and sex, life and death. ❧

Hanuman performs a heroic deed by returning with the Dronagiri Mountain.

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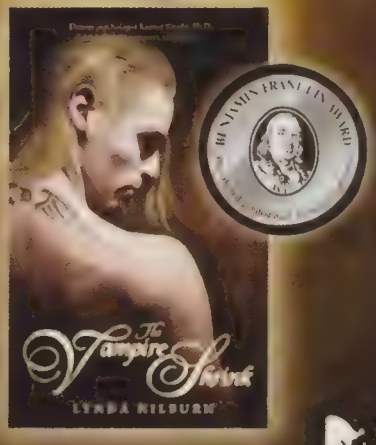

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Belief in things unseen:
call it faith, call it magic, call it radio?
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The Radio Magician

BY JAMES VAN PELT
ILLUSTRATION BY
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In the evening Charlie sprawled on the ragged hooked rug, facing the cathedral front of the burnished wood Edison, a pillow tucked beneath his chin, a blanket wrapped around his shoulders, and his useless legs encased in casts, sticking behind him. Eyes shut, he listened to KLZ, the Reynolds Radio Company, and then slowly rotated the dial through the other Denver stations. Sometimes late at night he'd pick up WDAF out of Kansas City or WAAF in Chicago. Everywhere he turned he found wavering voices, scratchy baseball games, foreign speech, and strange music. News from overseas. Poland invaded. President Roosevelt. Big bands. The slightest twist of the wooden knob brought new sounds, all so far, far away from his tiny bedroom and the ragged hooked rug. He wished he could crawl in among the glowing tubes with their tiny suns suspended in glass cages. They warmed his chilled hands. He'd listen as hard as he could so that he wouldn't hear his own breathing, so he wouldn't even *think* about his breathing. Did that breath hurt? What about the next one? Did the muscles in his chest tighten up just a little that time?

Mom had said, "You're luckier than some, son. It's only your legs."

So far, thought Clarence. So far. No, he didn't want to think about breathing.

So, he listened to *The Shadow, Bobby Benson and the B-Bar-B Riders, The Tom Mix Ralston Straight Shooters,* and he loved Charlie Chan stories from *Five Star Theater,* but mostly he listened for *Professor Gilded's Glorious Magical Extravaganza.* On the table by the window, the clock ticked to the hour, just as the announcer said, "Now, for your listening pleasure, Denver's very own radio magician." Clarence shivered in delight, and waited impatiently through a Pepsodent commercial.

"We return today to disappearance and transference," said Professor Gilded. "Last session, we talked of coins that moved from one hand to the next, from your hand to a pocket, from a pocket to a purse, or coins that vanished all together."

Clarence scooted closer to the radio, holding his own coin tight, a gold quarter eagle that felt warm and smooth. Tonight he barely had a headache, so the show was more enjoyable.

"You see, I put a coin in my left hand. I show it to the audience. The coin is there, I assure you. Its edges press against my skin. Everyone has seen it go into my left hand. That is the secret. Everyone must see."

Clarence pictured Professor Gilded on his tiny radio stage. Once *The Denver Post* had printed a picture of the professor's broadcast. Beside him, his top hat rested on a spindly-legged table. The audience of ten who were there by the luck of having their names drawn from letters they'd sent the show, leaned forward. Every week Clarence wrote Professor Gilded a letter, but his name had never been drawn.

Last week, Dad had patted Clarence's head. "How would we get you there, Clarence boy? You won't be going on that journey while you are sick. But write your letters. It's good your mind is so active." Then Dad drew a long breath through his pipe, and held it in his lungs before releasing a steady gray stream.

Professor Gilded continued, "The coin does not know the trick. That is the trick. The coin does not know. So when the magic happens, the coin has jumped from my left hand to wherever I want it to go." He paused. A quiet drum rolled in the background as it did before the magic occurred. "Where do you think the coin has appeared this time? It is not in my left hand as you can see." The audience oohed and then clapped. Clarence squirmed in contentment. He *could* see Professor Gilded's empty hand. "Young lady with the fancy hat sitting in the back row. Yes, you. Would you check inside that beautiful red ribbon on the hat?"

A surprised squeal burst from the background. The audience buzzed with startled conversation.

The announcer said, "Ma'am could you describe what happened for our listeners?"

"The coin was inside my hat! Professor Gilded never moved from the stage!" She giggled suddenly. "I'm going to keep this forever."

Clarence squeezed the quarter eagle, a birthday present. "A ten-year-old deserves real money," Mother had said as she gave it to him. "It's a lucky coin, minted the year your father and I were born." She put her finger on the date, 1910. "You can't spend it. It's not legal money anymore." She leaned close, like a conspirator. "We were supposed to turn all the gold over to the government in 1933, but I held this one for you." The secret made the coin worth even more. Sometimes he thought of what the two-and-a-half dollars could buy, and it made him feel rich.

Clarence pressed the small coin's bumpy edges against his skin, clenched it in his fist, turned the hand over, willed the coin to vanish. He scrunched his forehead, focused, tried to believe the quarter eagle was no longer in his grasp. But it was no good, just like wishing he could move his legs was no good. Even getting around on crutches would be better than his plaster jail. New crutches rested against the closet door. Beneath them in a box waited leg braces with long metal bars, heavy leather straps, and black buckles. Someday, his mother promised, he would walk in them. The casts, though, were too heavy, and he couldn't swing his legs to keep himself moving forward. A week ago he'd tried, only to fall face first onto the hardwood floor.

Professor Gilded's voice broke in, "We do not dabble in the supernatural here. Charlatans claim their magic is real. The coin's disappearance is an illusion, a trick of perception only, but our perceptions make reality for us all. If you perceive you are cowardly, then illusion becomes the world. If you perceive you are ill, then illness becomes you."

Clarence's eyes popped open. He turned the sound up, his own attempts at the trick forgotten. Beneath his casts, his legs ached. He remembered running home down the long muddy lane beside the field, its corn already harvested, the broken stalks lying across each other. He'd run on the weeds beside the lane to keep his shoes dry. Then he stumbled. For a second, he thought he'd stepped in the mud, but he could see the shoe was clean. His right leg dragged again. He slowed to a heavy limp, massaging his thigh through his jeans. What was wrong with his leg? The house had never looked so far away. Too far to call for help. He leaned on the fence and felt his strength fading.

Just as he reached the gate an hour later, Mom came out on the porch to look for him. She ran to him as he fell, her face wet with fear. By morning, the left leg had gone weak too. How far would it stretch? As the doctor poked at him later that day, Clarence made a fist, then unmade it, over and over. Would the paralysis spread? Fist. No fist. Fist. No fist.

Professor Gilded said, "The world's illusions cloud perceptions. Most fail to recognize reality before them. They believe they are poor, or ugly, or life's horizons are short. If my assistant will allow me to demonstrate, observe the reality of my four-legged friend."

The sound of clopping came from the speakers before the announcer said, "Professor Gilded's beautiful assistant, Sonia, is leading a horse into the studio, a strawberry roan, courtesy of the Phipps Ranch. I have to tell you folks, livestock in a radio studio is not what you see everyday." Chairs scraped across a wooden floor. Someone said, "Give him a bit of room."

The announcer whispered, "The studio is not large, my friends. Our audience has moved to the back wall. The horse, a gentle one, chosen especially for this demonstration, stands no more than five feet from them. Professor Gilded's stage gives him a height advantage. He's removing a large, blue blanket from the chest behind him."

Clarence turned the sound up again. The big trick always ended the show. First, the small demonstrations. Cards that reordered themselves. Balls that multiplied. Flowers that changed colors. Handkerchiefs that metamorphed into birds. All the while Professor Gilded lectured on magic, on the magic he was doing and the magic in the world, as he built to the finale, something so impressive that his audience clapped and clapped and clapped until the sound faded and the show ended. But he'd never worked with a horse! He couldn't possibly make a horse vanish from a small studio in front of an attentive audience. Not even Houdini could accomplish such a feat. For a moment, Clarence didn't think about his legs.

"A beautiful animal, the horse. Much more intelligent than humanity imagines. Please, people, run your hands along the horse's side. Don't be shy. Feel his beating heart. Ahh, a true horse fancier, are you? Yes, check his hooves. This is a hale and healthy representative of his breed. Assure yourselves of his reality, for, I promise you, in a moment you will doubt your memories and senses, and, perhaps, you will wonder what other illusions you harbor about the world."

Outside Clarence's window, a trolley car rattled by. Every fifteen minutes the trolley clattered, reminding him that his parents had moved from the farm so they were close to Broadway and Denver General Hospital. "We can't risk him, Thomas," Mom said. "The doctors warned about the disease migrating into his lungs. We might need Dr. Drinker's respirator until Clarence becomes strong again."

Dad had only nodded, and soon he completed negotiations with their neighbor to lease the land. Within weeks, both parents had found part-time work, which was remarkable. Jobs were hard to come by. Mom cleaned houses while Dad sorted mail. Clarence envisioned the virus like a horrible mold. Its name sounded like a mold, poliomyelitis. The doctors put his legs in casts. Itching during the day was intolerable, but Clarence could force a pencil, or a ruler , or a straightened coat hanger only so far under the plaster. Maybe the virus really resembled a mold, growing out of sight in the cast's moist darkness. If the casts came off now, would his legs look human anymore? And that wasn't the worst. In his blood, he pictured the virus marching toward his lungs, filling them with cauliflower-like lumps of gray and green mold until he couldn't inhale. Mom called the machine they would put him in "Dr. Drinker's respirator," an iron lung, and Porter's Hospital only had one. Iron lung. Iron lung. Nothing sounded more frightening. It made him think of iron crosses and invasions, a German army charging up his arteries' roads, a blitzkrieg to the heart. But that wasn't the worst. Close as they lived now, the iron lung would do no good if someone else filled the machine. Clarence was not the only sick child in Denver. An eleven-year-old from Broomfield lay in the machine now. The *Post* put his picture in the paper yesterday. The caption read, "Young Sean Garrison, completely paralyzed from the neck down, battles for his life against all odds." But he didn't look like he was battling in the picture. He looked like he'd lost, and all the weight of that loss and all the grief were written in his face.

Professor Gilded said, "Could you hold the edge of the blanket, Sonia? There, stand on the stool so you may reach high enough. Ah, it is a good horse, longing for its stable perhaps, for a fresh pile of hay and a rubdown for the evening."

The announcer's lowered voice barely leaked from the speakers. "I and the audience cannot see the roan, but we see the blanket's ends. There is no place to lead the horse. I can hardly describe the tension as we wait for Professor Gilded's wonder. I'm afraid he has set himself too daunting a task tonight."

A drum rumbled in the background.

Professor Gilded asked, "Do you believe the horse is still behind the blanket? If I have planted doubt thoroughly enough, then the horse may both be there and not be there. You have no way of telling, unless, of course, you walk around my blanket." He paused. The drum rolled louder. "Or, I can pull the blanket away."

A clatter, a scream, then voices in tumult. Another scream.

"I cannot believe what I am witnessing," gasped the announcer. "Too much. Too much." A hard click, as if the microphone hit something. "Oh, be glad you cannot see."

Someone sobbed.

"Professor Gilded holds his blanket over his arm, like a cape. Sonia stands beside him. The horse, the beautiful roan that walked into the studio is gone, but ... the bones ... a pile of bones sits on the floor. Horse bones, dry and clean, piled as if flesh and fur disappeared. No muscle. Oh, please, can we have a commercial now?" Another click.

Professor Gilded's soothing voice said, "An illusion, I assure you. A trick of light and distraction, as all the best magic is."

"Sonia takes the blanket," said the announcer's shaky voice. "He picks up the skull."

"Alas, Horatio, I knew him well." Professor Gilded laughed, a long satisfying chuckle. "The magic show is theater in the best tradition. Shakespeare wove illusions too. The bard said, 'I'll cross it, though it blast me. Stay, illusion! If thou hast any sound, or use of voice, speak to me, if there be any good thing to be done.' As you leave the studio you will find the lovely roan on the street, awaiting your inspection."

The show's closing musical notes played. Clarence realized he had pressed himself off the floor with his hands so his head was closer to the speaker. His arms trembled with the effort.

The announcer appeared to have recovered composure. "Tonight's show was brought to you by the kind attention of our sponsors. Be sure to shop for products that support the continued broadcast of *Professor Gilded's Glorious Magical Extravaganza*." The music rose, but Clarence heard the announcer say to someone in the background, so muffled that Clarence wondered if he heard it at all, "What the hell was that?"

Clarence's bedroom door opened. He twisted to his side to see his mother holding a basin, several towels, and a filled bucket heavy enough to make her lean.

"Show over, son?" She put the towels, bucket, and basin next to him on the rug.

"Yes, it was a good one." He shivered with the thought of bones. Professor Gilded said the horse was outside the studio and that the show was a trick, but how could he fool that many people who stood so close? A horse is not a coin to be hidden in a sleeve or to be gripped by the back of the hand while the audience sees an empty palm. Clarence knew coin tricks and the names of tricks: the gangster spin, the backspin bounce, the knuckle roll, the horizontal waterfall. He could flick a coin into a hidden pocket, make a coin between two cards vanish, pull a coin out of someone's hair, but they were practiced techniques, not magic. Making a coin disappear just involved making the audience's eye go to the wrong place. When he did the tricks for his friends, he watched their eyes, and when they looked away from the coin, he had them.

Iron lung. Iron lung. Nothing sounded more frightening. It made him think of iron crosses and invasions, a German army charging up his arteries' roads, a blitzkrieg to the heart.

Clarence turned his hand over. Where was his quarter eagle? A red circle showed where he'd held it so tight for so long, but where was it?

"I'm going to need you on your back, Clarence. Help me here."

She knelt beside him and lifted his right leg over his left as he rolled. Still, despite her care, his casted foot thumped when it hit the floor. "I'm tired of waiting this disease out," she said. She sat back on her heels. "Are you tired of just waiting?"

Clarence nodded. On his back, he looked for the coin. Perhaps it rolled under the radio. She'd tied her hair into a bun behind her ears, but strays escaped from all sides, touching her cheeks with black threads and sticking to the sweat of her forehead. He rested on his elbows so he could see the casts, smudged now with weeks of dragging around. "What are you thinking?"

Mom took a heavy pair of scissors from the basin, then filled the basin from the bucket. Steam eddied off the surface. "There's a nurse in Australia who claims that putting children in casts is exactly the wrong thing to do." She snipped the scissors open and shut a few times. "Your muscles are paralyzed, but they're not dead, so we're going to remind them what it feels like to be active." As she talked, she worked her way down the cast, using both hands to clip through the plaster-stiffened cloth. Clarence wanted to shrink away from the blade as Mom cut past the knee and down the shin. "President Roosevelt himself recovered from polio, and look how far he's gotten. There." She pulled the cast apart like a long clam. Clarence's leg, marked with grime at the thigh and ankle, lay as pale as a fish in the

middle. No mold! But it smelled like the root cellar. Clarence wrinkled his nose.

Mom moved to the next one. When she finished, she dipped a towel in the basin, then cupped her hand under his knee and gently lifted. A ripple of pain flashed from his knee to the back of his thigh. Clarence gasped.

"Sorry," said Mom. She draped the hot towel over his leg. Water pooled in the cast. "The Aussie nurse says that the muscles will respond to stimulation. I'm going to rub the muscles, but I also have to move your leg, son. It might be uncomfortable." She put one hand under his knee again and the other on the foot. Her serious eyes stared into his. Clarence nodded. Mom pressed the foot toward him while pulling the knee up.

Clarence had read that polio is the cruelest of diseases: it paralyzes but feeling remains. Liquid fire poured down his leg, like the skin would turn inside out. He scrunched his eyes tight. Thigh muscles stretched, moved, tore apart, melted, screamed a thousand tiny voices of death and torment, remade themselves into agony battalions, fought bloody battles, crushed each other with stones, ground salt into their wounds, flailed their backs with rose stems, broke their bones, pulled their fingernails off, stuck each other with rusty pitchforks, then twisted them deeper and deeper.

"There," said Mom. "That's one. Four more on this leg before we go to the next."

In the middle of the night, Clarence lay on his back in bed, his legs' memory a throbbing reminder of the session Mom said they would go through again in the morning. The clock ticked loudly in the hallway, forever holding tonight's pain and the inescapable progress to tomorrow's session.

From the bedroom next door, Mom and Dad argued. "How could an Australian nurse know more than our own doctor?" Dad talked calmly, his voice a steady rumble. "If her system was good, don't you think doctors here, American doctors, would prescribe it?"

"Sister Kenny has shown results. I don't have faith in that 'convalescent serum.' It doesn't make sense to pump blood in him from people who have recovered from the disease. That doesn't work for other diseases."

Like all of their arguments, they were reasonable with each other, but Clarence still rolled over carefully, helping his left leg to go over his right, biting his lower lip until it stopped moving, then buried his head under the pillow. The sheets smelled of the menthol and petroleum jelly Mom had rubbed into his skin.

A little while later, their voices quieted, then their bedroom door clicked open. Steps creaked in the hallway before his own door opened. Mom padded into the room. Peeking under the pillow, Clarence saw her bare legs beneath her short robe and the thick wool socks she wore as slippers. She rubbed his back gently.

"I'm awake," Clarence said, sliding the pillow aside.

Mom's hand stopped. "You should be asleep. Sleep heals." She kneaded the muscles under his shoulder blade. The motion felt comforting. Clarence sighed. He remembered today's broadcast. He had wanted to tell Mom about it earlier, but hadn't had a chance. "Do you think Professor Gilded can really make a horse disappear?"

Mom laughed. "I saw a magic show once. The magician sawed a woman in half, and then he put her back together. He made a table float, so I suppose, but, Clarence, it's a *radio* show. He could tell you he was making the state capitol vanish and you wouldn't know any different."

"There were people there, ten of them. They saw Professor Gilded turn a real horse into a pile of bones, and then the horse was whole again, outside the studio."

Mom moved to the other shoulder blade. "They said ten people were there. They could be actors." She scooted farther up on the bed so she could rub his shoulders. "But maybe it is true, son. Marvelous things happen all the time, miracles, even."

"Do you think Professor Gilded makes miracles?"

She stopped rubbing again. "You have to believe in miracles. Miracles and hard work. That's a powerful combination."

"Does Dad believe in miracles?"

"Well, that's a good question. He told me once that he believes in Jesus, but he doesn't believe someone who says he's talked to him lately."

Clarence giggled.

She patted his head. "Now, you go to sleep. Tomorrow we'll try a little of the hard work and see if we can't help our miracle along. How do your legs feel?"

"They hurt. They didn't hurt as much in the casts."

"I think they'll feel better soon. Remember, they haven't moved in a month." She pushed herself up from the bed. "Oh, I found your birthday quarter eagle in my sock when I put it on." The coin clicked when she placed it on his nightstand. "I have no idea how it got there, but you better hold onto it. Remember, it's for luck." She tucked the covers in so they pulled snug against his chest. "Don't forget, tomorrow your dad and I will both be at work. Mrs. Bentley from next door will come by to see if you need anything."

Clarence nodded. In all the times Mom and Dad had been gone together, Mrs. Bentley never dropped in, which was okay because Clarence could listen to the radio as long as he wanted.

After she left, Clarence pulled himself close enough to the nightstand to reach the coin. New aches broke out as his legs shifted, but he gritted his teeth until his fingers found its mellow, round shape. From the light coming in off the street, he examined its soft gold. It fitted neatly into his palm, then vanished into his fist. "Now you see it," he said in the empty room. "Now you don't." He opened the hand where the quarter eagle still sat, but he imagined what it would be like to make it go away. When his hand hid it, the coin was both there and not there. He only had to choose the reality where it wasn't, and the hand would be empty. How did the coin get into Mom's sock? What had he been thinking about the coin during Professor Gilded's show?

Was it possible that the bald, bow-tied man *was* Professor Gilded? But where was the accent? Clarence imagined Gilded as tall, like a black-cloaked Abraham Lincoln. Who was this guy?

He fell asleep thinking about coins appearing out of a lady's hat, and long red velvet-lined black robes, and then, finally, as he slid into the deep darkness, he dreamed of a horse galloping across a field of spring hay, a divine roan with a long tail whipping behind, until it staggered on suddenly weakened legs, trying so hard to stay upright and running. It buckled, whinnying in terror as only a horse can, its eyes wide, its nostrils snorting, before the fur and flesh disappeared. Pathetically, it took one skeletal step, then clattered into a pile of crisp, white bones. Green hay poked up between its ribs as the skull rolled a few feet more, the last of its momentum used up. In the dream, Clarence cried until he saw a gold glimmer reflected in the horse's jaw. It was his quarter eagle clenched between the teeth, catching the sun.

Then, he slept.

In the morning, the massage hurt even worse. Mom bit her lips

in as she pushed her thumbs deep into Clarence's thigh muscles, and she rubbed and bent and twisted and grinded and pinched for weeks until Clarence couldn't hold his breath any longer. He released his pain in short gasps, concentrating on the radio as she dug her thumbs deep into the back of his thighs. The news reported Britain, France, Australia, and New Zealand declared war on Germany. Then a commentator argued America should stay out of the conflict.

"There. Not so bad, was it. Just ten minutes this time," said Mom. She used the back of her wrists to wipe her eyes. "We'll have you walking before Christmas."

When she left, Clarence lay on his back, staring at the ceiling. Polio, he realized, had made him a little kid again. He couldn't see the tops of tables without someone lifting him. He couldn't reach the upper drawers on the dresser. All he saw when looking up at the window were clouds and the leafy branches. With the casts, he could at least slide himself around the room and even get to the bathroom without help, although it took a gymnastic maneuver that left his arms quivering to get himself onto the toilet.

From the higher vantage point of the bed, he could see most of the tree. Someone yelled to someone else, and their feet pounded on the sidewalk as they ran by. Maybe they were playing tag. Maybe they were throwing a ball back and forth. Clarence couldn't see enough to tell. Then the trolley rattled down the middle of the street. The trolley stopped at the end of the block and ran all the way to downtown Denver, passing the radio station with its soundstage. Even now, Professor Gilded could be preparing for today's show.

Clarence rolled onto his side. The crutches and leg braces rested in the shadow next to the window. Professor Gilded's show began in two hours. By trolley, he could be there in fifteen minutes, if only he could get to the trolley stop at the corner.

It took most of an hour to get into his pants. The pant legs folded over and kept twisting, so he had to inch them up his legs. He looked up every time the house creaked, afraid Mrs. Bentley would choose this moment to check on him, sitting on the floor in his underwear. His feet wouldn't cooperate, and when his toes caught the cloth, sharp pains raced up the back of his legs. By the time he buttoned the top button, perspiration ran into his eyes and dripped from his chin. Getting into the braces took less time, but the leather was stiff and fastening the heavy buckles hurt his fingers. When he finished, he rested on his back. Placing the crutches under his arms while maintaining his balance seemed an impossible task, but there was only fifty minutes until the show started, and his legs felt so much lighter and more flexible without the casts that he was sure he could get to the trolley on time.

He clumped through the hallway to the front door. In his left pocket nestled the quarter eagle; in the right, five dimes. He had no idea what the trolley cost. At the door, he rested his hands on the doorknob. For a month he'd been lying or sitting. His head hadn't been this much higher than his feet for weeks. Every muscle from the hips down tingled and ached. Clarence bit the inside of his mouth and opened the door, clenching the crutches tight under his arms. When he stepped outside, he realized he hadn't felt the sun on his face since he'd gotten sick.

The trolley man took a dime for the ride after lifting Clarence to a seat. "You hurt your legs, son? Where you going?" He smelled of garlic and cigarettes.

"The KLZ radio studio." Clarence tried to keep the tremor out of his voice. The half-block walk to the trolley stop had been the longest sustained effort of his life. Every crack in the sidewalk, every pebble, every movement threatened to pitch him over. In the house, he'd used a footstool and chair to get himself upright enough for the crutches. There was no way to help himself in the open. He would just have to lay there until someone saved him.

The woman on the seat next to him, holding a basket full of knitting, nodded and smiled. "You'll need to get off at 15th Street. I listen to KLZ all the time." She glanced at his leg braces. "Must be hard getting around in school. I hope your schoolmates are kind."

Clarence leaned the crutches against the trolley's wall, careful to keep them from falling. The trolley lurched into motion, clacking over the tracks toward downtown Denver. Even the jiggling hurt. He focused on the shops passing by the windows and smiled through the pain. The radio station was only fifteen minutes away, now. He fingered the quarter eagle. It's here and it's not here, he thought. Only thinking makes it so.

A few minutes later, the trolley passed the hospital. A pair of marble lions, their jaws open, flanked the double-door entrance at the top of a flight of stairs. To the left, a wheelchair ramp rose along the side of the building for the crippled. The building's severe white face rose six stories into the sky punctuated by rows of dark windows. Clarence's breathing tightened just looking at it. Somewhere inside, Sean Garrison stared at the ceiling, the iron lung squeezing his chest to expel the air, then reversing the pressure so he could inhale. Clarence could almost hear the wheezing sounds. He wondered, how does he itch his nose? He couldn't move a muscle below his neck. What does he think about? Clarence was glad when they left the hospital behind.

KLZ wasn't directly on Broadway, it turned out. The conductor lowered Clarence to the sidewalk, clamping his arms to his crutches so he hit the cement ready to go. "The station's a block that way, son," he said, pointing. "Watch your step."

Clarence's legs quivered beneath him as the trolley rumbled away. The radio station's sign looked awfully far. He gritted his teeth and leaned forward.

Ten minutes later his arms ached with the effort to keep him upright, but he stood before KLZ's front door, a heavy metal and glass barrier. In the shadow of the room behind the door, he saw a secretary looking at him, a prim blonde with dark-framed glasses, like a librarian. Before he could brace himself to pull the door open, she was holding it for him.

"My word, child, what are doing here by yourself? Where are your parents?"

"They're at work. Do you mind if I sit down?" Clarence lowered himself gingerly onto one of the two worn leather chairs in the lobby. He sighed, his eyes closed, as the weight fell from his arms and legs. A ceiling fan creaked through slow revolutions and stirred the smell of furniture polish and old magazines. Across the small receiving area, in the other chair, a balding man wearing a blue bow tie and a white shirt studied a newspaper. He glanced at Clarence, briefly meeting his eyes, then turned a page and returned to his reading. Behind the secretary's desk, three doors, marked STUDIO 1, STUDIO 2 and SOUND ENGINEER, were closed. Drooping wires high on the wall connected to a bare speaker, playing KLZ's afternoon news softly, a litany of political reaction to the events in Europe. Polish soldiers were in retreat. British bombers attacked German warships.

"You look like you could use a glass of water." The secretary disappeared through the sound stage door.

Sweat soaked the sides of Clarence's shirt. His legs throbbed from the arch of his feet, where the braces' metal bar clamped against his shoes, to the grinding spots where the leather upper straps dug into his hips. Even his fingers hurt from squeezing the crutches, and he doubted he could make the one-block trip back to the trolley stop, but he was here. He had arrived! He couldn't keep a smile off his face.

The secretary returned with the water. Clarence rolled the cool glass against his forehead before drinking half of it in one long swallow.

"Is Professor Gilded here?" he asked. "I'd like to meet him."

"That old fraud?" said the man in the bow tie, putting his newspaper down. He winked at the secretary. "He's a bore."

Clarence's jaw tightened up until he realized the man was teasing. At least he was pretty sure he wasn't serious.

"Do you know him?" Clarence pulled the quarter eagle out of his pocket. "I've been practicing magic." He did a quick knuckle roll back and forth with the coin.

The bow-tied man put his paper aside. "Can you do a pass under and around?"

Clarence rolled the coin between his fourth and little finger, tucked it under, caught it on his thumb, then brought it around from underneath. "Sure. I learned that one first."

The man produced a half dollar from a vest pocket, then walked it from finger to finger on his right hand. "Okay, we'll race. First one to get the coin around their hand ten times wins. It's a little unfair. My hands are bigger and the coin has farther to go."

They counted out loud. Clarence was at eight when the man reached ten, flipped the coin into the air, and then watched solemnly as the white feather it had turned into drifted to the floor.

"You're pretty good for a kid. Can you do a sleeve flick? How about a coin cascade?"

Clarence nodded.

The secretary, who had returned to her desk, laughed. "Don't get him going. He'll talk your ear off about magic." She looked at the clock. "Bob will be here in a couple minutes. You'd better get into the studio."

The bow-tied man dismissed her comment with a wave. He leaned toward Clarence, his elbows on his knees. "So, why do you want to see Professor Gilded?"

Clarence tried to recall the picture of Gilded from the *Denver Post*. His hair had been thick and black, almost touching his shoulders, and a moustache hid most of his mouth. Was it possible that the bald, bow-tied man *was* Professor Gilded? But where was the accent? Clarence imagined Gilded as tall, like a black-cloaked Abraham Lincoln. Who was this guy?

He thought about soldiers marching to far-off fronts, their courage flitting about them, not knowing if they would make it back, but he kept pushing forward, his braces clicking against the cement.

As if reading his mind, the bow-tied man said, "I'm John Albenice, his understudy. You can tell me."

A couple dressed in their Sunday best pushed through the door. The woman in a floral print dress with her hair pinned up, whose pinched cheeks and pointed chin made her look a little like Clarence's fourth-grade teacher, walked straight to the secretary and said, "We're here for Professor Gilded's afternoon performance. We have an invitation." She put an envelope on the desk. Her husband stood behind her, his hands pushed into his pockets, as if he really didn't want to be there.

"Of course, Studio 2, please." The secretary opened the door for them. Clarence glimpsed a short hallway.

"Will Professor Gilded be here soon?" He raised himself out of the chair to get a last look before the door closed. "He said perception is reality. He said if I perceive that I'm sick, that I am. I wanted to ask him what he meant by that."

John leaned back in his chair. He idly pulled his bow tie. "Professor Gilded says a lot of things on the air you probably shouldn't listen to, kid. He's paid to talk, you know. He's an entertainer."

The secretary cleared her throat and looked purposefully at the clock.

"Look, I've got to get ready for the show. He just meant that magic happens in your head." He stood up and started for the studio. "Are you as proficient with cards as you are with coins?"

"I can do a pretty good fan and a table spread, but my hands are too small for a one-hand shuffle. I'll have to grow into lots of tricks." He held up his hand like a starfish.

"Huh," John said. "Have you tried cutting down a deck? Smaller cards might do it." He tapped his chin thoughtfully. "I hadn't considered that before. I'll bet small cards might get a lot of kids interested in sleight of hand."

"Oh, no," said the secretary.

The door opened. A gray-headed man carrying a briefcase walked partway into the foyer, and then froze when he saw John.

"I told you to stay the gawd damned hell away from me, freak," said the man, bringing the briefcase to his chest like a shield.

The secretary stiffened. "Bob, there's a child in the room."

Clarence recognized the man's voice. He introduced and narrated *Professor Gilded's Glorious Magical Extravaganza*. He said "hell" on the air at the end of the last show.

John straightened. His voice deepened. "I'm not responsible for your irrational fears. If you can't separate a trick from reality, then you have the problem, not me." It was Professor Gilded's voice, without the accent. He stood in between the two chairs, only a yard from Clarence, and he didn't look like he was going to move.

Keeping his briefcase between them, the other man scooted along the front windows until he reached the sound engineer's door. He found the knob without looking away from John. "I'll announce the show, but I don't want to have anything to do with you. Keep your distance. There's nothing natural about you." The door slammed behind him.

John shrugged. He looked at Clarence. "Sorry you had to see that. He had difficulty with the horse trick. It ... disturbed him."

"Did you ... I mean, the professor really make a horse turn into bones?" Clarence's heart thumped in his throat.

"If you think so, then he did. That's the perception trick. An audience thought he did. And Bob there ... well," he moved toward the studio door. "He believes."

He stopped at the secretary's desk. "The only thing I really know about magic, kid, is that if there isn't some of it in the world, then we live in a dark, dark place. If you've got any, you have to share it."

The secretary reached into her hair. "Hey, what's this?"

John plucked the object off her palm. He looked at it, genuinely puzzled. "A 1910 quarter eagle. Isn't this yours?" He walked back to Clarence, the coin between his fingers. "Nice trick."

The coin dropped into Clarence's hand. He hadn't even realized that John had taken it.

"Nice trick yourself."

John paused. "I didn't do anything. How'd you pull it off? Pass it when she gave you the water? No, don't tell me. A magician never tells. But I like it. Effective illusion. Okay, gotta go. There will be a whole audience here soon, and the stage isn't ready." He shook Clarence's hand. "Somebody's got to amaze them all." He laughed, and Clarence thought he'd heard a hint of a European accent in it.

Then, he was gone. Clarence tossed the gold piece from one hand to the other.

The secretary looked at him pityingly. "If there were room in the studio, kid, he'd let you in, but we're booked for weeks."

When Clarence stood on the sidewalk outside the radio station, his arms felt completely without strength. Had he used up everything he had to get to the station? He stepped forward, letting most of his weight rest on the crutches, his breath ripping in short gasps against his aching legs. No hike could have ever been longer. He thought about soldiers marching to far-off fronts, their courage flitting about them, not knowing if they would make it back, but he kept pushing forward, his braces clicking against the cement. The metal creaked at the knees, and he went steps at a time with his eyes closed.

By the time he reached the trolley stop, he could hardly inhale, and his heart flurried like a trapped bird. Was this the beginning of a new paralysis? He whimpered. Cars passed on Broadway in the afternoon sun, and only after agonizing minutes the trolley trundled into sight.

"Please," gasped Clarence as the same driver from his ride downtown lifted him into the car, "can you take me to the hospital?"

Every bump jarred his legs. He held the back of his thighs to try to keep them from bouncing, but he couldn't anticipate the next jolt. His cheek rested against the wooden sill under the window, and tears leaked between his closed eyelids. Finally the trolley stopped.

"Hospital, young man," said the driver, concern in his voice.

Clarence struggled to get his crutches under his arms.

"No need. I've sent someone in to get you a wheelchair." He placed his hand on Clarence's shoulder. "You don't look good."

A nurse appeared at the trolley door and helped Clarence into the wheelchair.

"I'll take him to emergency," said the nurse. "We can evaluate him there."

"No," said Clarence. The trolley driver wrung his hands. Passengers crowded at the windows. A little girl holding a book waved at him through the glass. Clarence waved back weakly. "I need to go to the polio ward. I need to get to the iron lung."

The nurse started pushing him up the sidewalk toward the ramp. "You have polio? Are you experiencing breathing difficulty?" She sounded businesslike.

Clarence relaxed his head against the back of the wheelchair. He rested his hand on the quarter eagle in his pants pocket, its shape a solid comfort. "I'm not sick. I'm visiting. I want to see it."

"You look sick." The nurse walked beside him as they rose up the ramp and into the hospital's entranceway.

"Honest, I'm okay. I think I probably tried to do too much today. My legs hurt a little," he lied, "but I really want to see the polio ward."

He rolled into an elevator.

"There's someone in the iron lung already," she said.

Lights flicked beside each floor as the elevator went up. Clarence had never been in an elevator before. "I know. Sean Garrison. He was in the paper. How is he doing?"

"You're really not sick?" She looked down at him doubtfully. "If you're not, you're the sorriest looking healthy boy I've ever seen."

"I walked to the trolley all by myself."

"Hmmm." The elevator stopped and the doors opened. "I hope you don't mind if I have a doctor check you anyway, and we need to talk to your parents."

Forty beds separated by light green curtains filled the polio ward. At some, family members sat by the wan children. Antiseptic smells filled the air.

She wheeled him into a broad hallway, and then into a room where a large steel canister dominated the middle. A compressor whirred under the device, stopped, shifted, then whirred again with a lighter tone. Clarence knew the machine was switching back and forth between exhaling and inhaling. A dark-haired boy lay face up, only his head outside of the iron lung, looking at him blankly through a mirror positioned above his face. Grief lines marked his face. His eyes were bloodshot and red rimmed. Clarence had never seen anyone so sad. A long window in the metal showed his arms and chest, while another showed his legs. Two rubber-lined holes permitted doctors to reach in to rearrange the patient if necessary, but the only way to actually touch him would be to undo the heavy clasps that locked the head end to the rest of the machine.

Clarence pushed the top of the wheels to move closer. "Hi, I'm Clarence."

In the background, the motor clicked. "I'm sick," whispered the boy, and Clarence knew that he could only whisper because the power to speak came from the machine compression. He could talk when the iron lung made him exhale. Putting his hand on his own chest, Clarence tried to imagine being inside the canister.

The motor cycled several times. Clarence looked at Sean's reflection in the mirror. Sean looked back.

"Would you like to see a magic trick?" said Clarence.

The motor whirred.

Sean's voice was a falling leaf. "No."

"I'll show you anyway." The 1910 quarter eagle came out of Clarence's pocket. In the sterile hospital light, its gold glowed. He did knuckle rolls for Sean. He did false drops and sleight of hand passes, showing the coin and then vanishing it. He stacked the gold coin with the three dimes he had left, hid them under a tissue, then asked Sean where the coin was, top, bottom, or middle. Wherever Sean said it was, when Clarence uncovered the coins, there it was.

Two more nurses came into the room, watching Clarence go through his repertoire. They clapped when the coins reappeared in unexpected places.

"Magic is about perception," said Clarence, leaning close to Sean. Sitting in his wheelchair, his head was on the same level. "What we perceive is our reality. If you think you are hungry, then you find food. If you think you are cold, you shiver." Clarence paused. He thought about Professor Gilded on his stage talking to an audience. What happened that night when the horse turned into bones? How did Gilded perceive it? Did the animal shimmer before the flesh dissolved? Clarence flourished the quarter eagle. Sean watched, his eyes dark and intent.

"Now I'll show you a trick that will amaze you. I don't even know if I can do it, but I'll try. Are you ready?"

Sean nodded, mostly with his eyes.

The nurses leaned in.

Clarence clasped the coin in his right hand hard enough that he could feel the ribbed edge marking his palm. He let his thoughts drift from it, so that he was both holding the coin and not holding it. Forced distraction, but to himself, not his audience. He thought about war news and Pepsodent and *Bobby Benson and the B-Bar-B Riders*. Instead of the coin, he imagined the Edison's polished wood tuning knob in his fingers as he slowly turned from station to station, of how delicious the sound tasted late at night when his parents had gone to bed and the search for voices made the time flee. Clarence thought about magic. He thought about "take a card, any card" and "abracadabra" and "there's nothing up my sleeve." There were illusions and tricks, and then there was magic. There was a horse that was there and not there. Perception made it real. Perception ruled.

When he opened his hand, the coin was gone.

One of the nurses sighed, disappointed. After all the other tricks Clarence had done, this one must have seemed anticlimactic.

Clarence smiled. He said to Sean, "The coin is gone. Do you know where it is?"

Sean waited until the machine reversed so he could speak. "Is it ..." The motor clicked. He inhaled. It flipped into the exhalation cycle. " ... in my hand?"

"What?" said a nurse. She stepped to the side of the iron lung to look through the window. "Oh, my gosh." The other two nurses crowded around her. "He's got it in his hand! How did the coin get in there?"

Clarence touched Sean's forehead. "A friend of mine told me the world is a dark, dark place, if we see it that way, and if we've got any magic, we should share it."

Sean waited for the machine to give him the air. "Okay."

"You need to get better. Someone else might need that iron lung."

"I will."

Clarence shifted in his wheelchair. One of the braces clanked against the chair's metal frame, and he realized his legs didn't hurt as badly as they had on the trolley. He'd barely thought of them while he did the magic. The thought made him happy.

The nurses were still marveling about the coin. Clarence could see it through the window in the paralyzed boy's hand.

Slowly, Sean's fingers closed over it. ❧

Freedom
Starts

BY KAREN HABER

With a vivid imagination and supreme technical skills, Daniel Merriam is a master of fantastic art.

in the Mind

Many artists can dream up a fantasy palace in which to dwell, but few are capable of actually building one. Daniel Merriam is one of the lucky ones who can do both.

He's painted lacey white Victorian fancies cradled in the curve of the dreaming moon, and limned elaborate multistory treehouses perched on the longest, strongest limb of a venerable oak.

His dream houses are fantasies, not follies, detailed down to the pleated awning above a window and cozy armchair settled in a sitting room. And Daniel has gone one better than merely painting places he admires: he actually built his dream house, in Hawaii.

"Maxfield Parrish and I have that in common," he says with a laugh. "We both designed and built our own dream houses. His burned, I sold mine in Hawaii. Someday I'll build another one."

Above: *Rise and Shine;* Below (l to r): *Self-Esteem, The Cats' Meow, On the Go, Up & Away;* Opposite: *Bird Watcher.* Previous Spread: *Sea Blossom* (left) and *Ode de Papillion.*

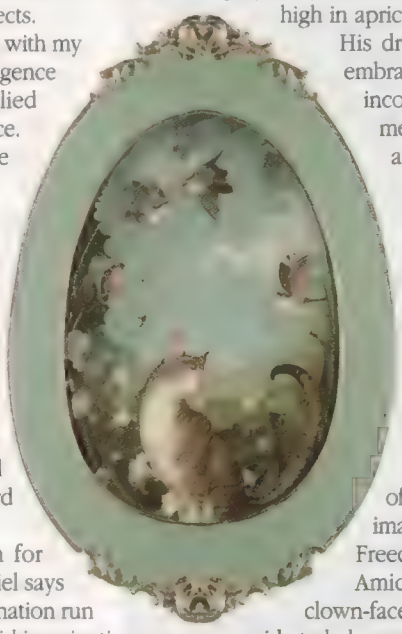
Daniel and Parrish have something else in common: romantic dreamlike imagery filled with storybook appeal. Daniel admits that Parrish is among the many artists who have had a great influence on his paintings.

He began early: at age 11, Daniel picked up colored pencils and discovered that he could make photorealistic copies of images he saw in *National Geographic* magazine. But art had to take a backseat to a boyhood filled with rustic tasks, working on the family home in Maine with his father and brothers. He grew up in a practical, homemade world where his artistic fantasies had to be kept safely out of sight while he played football and learned to build and fix houses. This hand-hewn legacy has shaped his career as an artist.

"There's always going to

Small wonder that Daniel is a champion of hand skills, a lover of traditional crafts, and collector of hand-built objects.

"I learned a lot about good hard work, working with my hands, and physically building something. The diligence and work ethic my father taught me I've applied directly to my artwork. It makes a lot of difference. There's a beauty to the discipline it takes to make a painting."



Although Daniel wanted to study art, his father insisted that he acquire marketable skills, so he studied architectural engineering and worked for architects as a designer and illustrator. Eventually, his need to pursue a path with heart made him put away his mechanical pencils and bring out his paints. And, with time, his father gave him his blessing.

The mark of the self-reliant craftsman still can be seen in Daniel's work: not for him the slick and easy digital world. He prefers to do his art the hard way, the traditional way, by hand.

He also prefers to use his own imagination for source material. A self-admitted daydreamer, Daniel says that he takes everything he sees and lets his imagination run away with it. "I've managed to develop a very lucid imagination. I rely on it." His idea of a quick vacation is to sit back on his couch at home in San Francisco, close his eyes, and let his imagination roam free.

Daniel's graceful paintings give a hint of what goes on in his head: gentlemen in spats peddle bubble bicycles, pipe organs sing as they're played by naked feet, frogs sprout butterfly wings, and houses float high in apricot skies.

His dreams go far beyond mere architectural beauty, embracing the fantastic, the erotic, and the mysterious, incorporating anthropomorphic and zoomorphic elements until the viewer may wonder if the subject is animal, mineral, or vegetable.

Daniel's painted dreams look back to an age of fine craftmanship, of ornament for ornament's sake. At first glance, his work is reminiscent of early 20th-century illustration seen in children's books. But his paintings also contain many surreal layers.

"The playful side of me wants to interact with imagery in a way that goes beyond the literal," Daniel says. "This interaction allows me to go beyond a landscape or stilllife or portrait.

"My use of surrealism has to do with some type of intrigue I have about juxtaposing reality with the imaginary. It's about breaking the rules, and freedom. Freedom starts in the mind."

Amid the welter of butterfly-winged flying fish and clown-faced angels are strange elements, revealing a darker side to balance the brilliant color and compelling patterns. Daniel has acknowledged using darker imagery for spark and contrast, journeying into his own private abyss to gather challenging images and ideas. "The dark side is part of all of us. It's there to be used."

Echoes of arabesques, memories of 16th-century Italian grotesques capering across earthen walls, and the artwork of earlier ages inform

be a place for the marks of human effort in art."

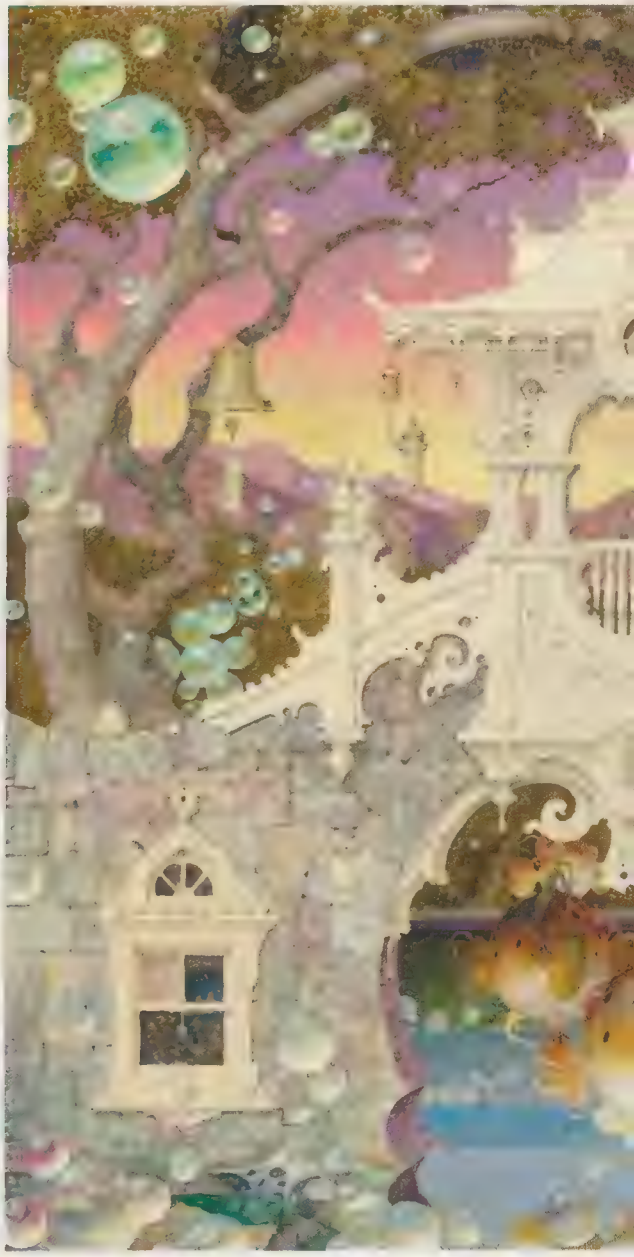
Above: *The Other Side of Heaven*; Top: *High Altitude*; Right: *Fish Story*; Top Right: *Master of Ceremonies*.

his work. Is Daniel a modern medievalist? That, and much more. His painting honors the span of art history. He seems equally haunted by the work of Hieronymous Bosch and Maxfield Parrish, by the sinuous curves of Art Nouveau and the harder lines and angles of Gothic architecture. Of course, his work is informed by the skills he honed as an architecture student. His mastery of line and perspective allows him to depict fantastic images straight out of his head.

Daniel's paintings are rendered in painstaking watercolor and acrylics, using washes, scaling, and taking advantage of textures that occur in the medium. He loves to see the hand of the artist in the work.

"There's nothing like going into the Louvre and gazing into the brushstrokes of the artists," he says. "I like the tactile aspect of painting, and the brushstrokes left by the human hand. There's always going to be a place for the marks of human effort in art."

Daniel enjoys creating enigmatic puzzles out of his paintings, filling some like *Holding on Till the End* (1999) with



cryptic yet compelling clues to his private meaning. Other works contain political commentary—*Toy Soldiers* (2006), *The Promise* (2001)—while others are tributes to family members and homages to great artists he admires.

His paintings and prints are exhibited at galleries throughout the United States and internationally, in Russia, Denmark, France, and in the Netherlands, and have been gathered in a retrospective volume: *The Eye of a Dreamer: The Art of Daniel Merriam.* In addition to painting, he has begun sculpting fantastic creatures.

"The satisfying thing about working in three dimensions is that you can actually create the thing you were depicting in 2-D."

Daniel never worries about running out of material. In fact, he hopes he'll have enough time in one lifetime to paint everything he imagines, and, perhaps, to build a few of those things as well. As he says in *The Eye of a Dreamer,* "There is so much around us to get inspired by." ❧

Visit Daniel's website at www.danielmerriam.com

It's easy to be kind when it doesn't cost you anything. The true test comes when the price goes up.

BY CARRIE VAUGHN
ILLUSTRATION BY JADA FITCH

The Happiest Place

The worst part of my job is the terminally ill kids. The ones without hope, who get a wish from some charity or other, and they and their families come here. Sometimes, it's a little girl who wants more than anything to spend her special day with her favorite princess. That's way too much pressure to put on a twenty-one-year-old aspiring actress in a hoop skirt. I shouldn't be responsible for making a dying child's dream come true.

I've done it twice now. The first was two months ago. Elizabeth, age ten, suffers from the final stages of a rare blood disease. Her mother just sent the park a letter saying she's in the hospital again and keeps a picture of the two of us by her bed to cheer her up.

The second is Abby. She has leukemia. She's already had a bone marrow transplant, and it didn't work. The cancer relapsed, and the doctors aren't hopeful. Her family made the request to visit the park, and she asked to spend part of the day with me. Rather, I happened to be on shift the day that she asked to meet my persona. That's all it is, luck of the draw. It kills me, because I have to shut down that part of my brain that knows this kid is dying and wants to burst into tears at the unfairness of it all. I have to smile my princess smile until my cheeks hurt and pretend like everything's going to be okay. And this kid smiles back at me and I think, How can you be so happy? How can seeing me dressed

up in a blue satin gown and blond wig make you so happy?

But of course, that's not what the kids see. They see Cinderella stepped out of a fairy tale, and they believe that dreams are real. I wonder, do they ever dream of staying alive?

Abby is like any other nine-year-old girl. When I step onto the sidewalk, her eyes light up and she gasps in delight. I've seen a whole crowd of girls gasp at the sight of me, and I'll admit it goes to my head sometimes. It's what keeps me here, when I ought to be spending my days at cattle calls in Hollywood.

I've been told her name ahead of time, so it seems like magic when I kneel by her wheelchair and say, "Hello, Abby."

She's bald as an egg, thin as a skeleton, and still she smiles, beaming so hard her face will surely break in two. Her brown eyes seem too large for her head, and they are gleaming.

"What would you like to do first?" I say. "Would you like to see the castle?"

She nods vigorously, and we go to see the castle, walking up the pathway, a whole crowd of us surrounding her wheelchair. Her family—parents, grandparents, aunt and uncle—follow behind us, Dad pushing the wheelchair, and all of them are smiling like this really is the happiest day of their lives. A park photographer runs alongside, snapping pictures. One of the pictures will sit by a hospital bed, no doubt. Abby holds my hand.

This is so exhausting.

I have a break at dinnertime. I've promised to return to watch the fireworks with Abby, and she'll remember the moment for the rest of her life, however many weeks of it the doctors say she has. She'll remember the moment through the needles, pain, and fear, and that's what keeps me going. That's what gets me through when what I really want to do is run screaming that I can't do this, I'm not a princess, I'm not a dream come true, I'm just a kid myself and I quit college because I thought I could be an actress and my boyfriend just broke up with me and I'm in a thousand family photos with a thousand little girls, smiling like a Barbie doll. But Abby will think of me when she's afraid, and maybe it will help, and maybe, just maybe, the magic is real sometimes.

After my break, I come back through the Cast Members Only door and find Christine, Abby's aunt, sitting on the ground behind a trash can, sobbing. Christine, Abby's mother's younger sister, is in her late twenties, young and smiling herself, though today her smile is the plastic one people wear when they really want to burst and scream. Most of the adults around Abby have worn that smile for at least part of the day. Christine has cheerfully pushed Abby's wheelchair and carried bags much of the time so Abby's parents could be close to their daughter, hold Abby's hand, and ooh and ahh with her at some new wonder. Christine is support staff. I understand the role.

And she's broken. She hid herself away behind hedges and trash cans so she could break. I think of walking away. Let her put herself back together, rejoin the group, and pretend her eyes aren't red and puffy.

But I kneel by her and put a satin-gloved hand on her shoulder. "Are you all right?"

"What? Oh—it's you." She looks up, startled, sniffles loudly, and scrubs a sleeve across her face. "I'm sorry, I just had to get away for a minute."

"You can only pretend to be happy for so long."

She nods, and I see the family resemblance with Abby, an earnestness that comes through in the gesture.

"It's just ... this place. It's so amazing, but everywhere we go they talk about dreams, and they sing about dreams, and at every step they tell you that dreams come true and that people live happily ever after. Well—it was my sister's dream to have a baby, to have a beautiful little girl and watch her grow up. Then this happens. I look at Abby, and she's so happy, and her dream has come true, and how can this place be so real and so impossible at the same time!"

The words come in a rush and she's sobbing again, tears streaming, her back hunched, shuddering. My own floodgates are opening, the actress-brain that manages to keep it locked away failing.

I turn my face away, close my eyes, and take a deep breath. "Stop it," I say quietly. "My makeup's going to run."

Christine's sob turns into a laugh. "Oh God, I'm sorry! And your dress, you shouldn't be on the ground like this! You know, for just a minute I forgot you're not really Cinderella."

The tears start all over again. I'm sitting beside her by this time.

"I can't do this anymore," she says. "I can't go back."

I know exactly how she feels. I put my arm around her shoulders. She hugs me back, her face pressed to my shoulder, and cries it all out. I hold her and whisper nonsense. That everything is going to be all right. Like I am really Cinderella, like I really can make everything better.

After closing, after the fireworks have faded and all the lights are out, I go into the park. We're not supposed to do that. I'd said goodbye to Abby and her family, and I wonder how long my picture will sit by her hospital bed.

For a long time I stand on the bridge before the castle, looking up at its parapets, its gilded filigree confections. Wearing jeans and a tank top, I'm not a princess anymore. Under that fairy tale façade is nothing more than wood and concrete. Just like we'd all put on a good face today, to make this the happiest day of Abby's short, short life. When underneath we'd turned to ash.

I am a rank, despicable liar.

I want to make a wish of my own, but I have too many choices. Blue Fairies, stone wells, godmothers, evening stars. The smog and haze is such that I can only see one small star, shining faintly, right above the castle. A stray bit of firework that has forgotten to fall back to earth. It almost seems like an omen.

Tonight, I choose the wishing well for my late-evening ritual. I only do this sometimes, because to do it every night would spoil it, make it ordinary. Only days like this when I have a sick girl's short future weighing on my shoulders. I find the wishing well and put my hands on either side, leaning all the way over the edge, calling down inside so my voice echoes.

"I'm wishing!"

For happiness, unspecified. I don't know what I want anymore.

A week later, I receive a letter from Elizabeth's mother. My supervisor wore a grim smile when she handed it to me. Elizabeth slipped into a coma and passed away quietly last week. She talked about her trip to the park right up to the end. Thank you, thank you, and thank you, her mother writes. For what? I ask myself that more and more. I wonder how Abby is doing.

How can such a little piece of magic be so strong in the face of that immense tragedy? I fold the letter and secure it in my purse.

That evening I find a tiara at the bottom of my locker. I don't recognize it from any of the costumes. All the usual tiaras are glittering, decked with rhinestones, visible from miles away so no one will mistake their wearers for anything but princesses. This is different, plain, a half-circlet of gold with a clear, faceted gem mounted in the center.

A slip of paper is tied to one of the arms. I pull the note free of the string that ties it.

One line of handwriting reads, *I can't do this anymore. I pass it on to you.*

The writing looks like a woman's. The words are clean, but the paper is wrinkled, as if whoever wrote it crushed the note, then smoothed it flat again. I look around the locker room for someone who might be watching me, who might have snuck the tiara into my locker then lingered to see my reaction. Only the usual bustle fills the place, dancers peeling off tights, character actors laughing in the showers as they wash off the smells of their plush suits.

The locker next to me belongs to Audrey, who plays Sleeping Beauty in one of the stage shows. I sometimes don't recognize her, because her short black hair is so at odds with the blond wig she wears for her character.

"Audrey?" She turns to me, inquiring. I show her the tiara. "Do you know whose this is?"

She shakes her head. "No, sorry. I don't even recognize the costume."

"Yeah, neither do I." The front of the locker room has a lost and found box for stray bras and sneakers and the like. I hate to just leave it there.

"Some of us are going out for dinner. Want to come?"

I'm tired. The exhaustion settles on me like a warm blanket. The letter about Elizabeth hasn't improved my mood. I shake my head at Audrey. "Not tonight. I'm beat."

"Maybe next time." She slings her bag over her shoulder and heads out with some of the other girls.

I hold the tiara in both hands, and it feels warm against my skin.

I slip it into my backpack and take it home.

The studio apartment in a not so nice part of town is good enough, because I'm hardly ever there, between work, auditions, classes, and scraping together enough to get by. Ramen noodles or pasta await my leisure, but I don't make dinner. I leave my backpack by the front door, after taking out the tiara.

Holding it, I sit in the middle of the floor and wonder. Just a bit of strangeness, maybe even a bit of magic, like the well, like being a girl's dying wish.

I put the tiara on. It settles comfortably above my ears.

I close my eyes and see a room, a studio apartment like this, but worse, with peeling paint, holes in the carpet, and soiled furniture. A family of six lives there, a mother and five children. Father in prison. A girl, the oldest of the kids, sits at a kitchen table doing homework, not minding her siblings screaming around her, her mother's scolding, the noise of a television. Her pencil scratches math problems, and she works through to the end of the page. Then she digs a history book out of the stack and reads. She wants to go to college, the thought comes over me like an electric shock. But she'll never get there without help.

So I grant her wish. Just like that, because I can, because the girl is working so hard and I want her to succeed, I want this little bit of magic to work. One day she checks the mail and finds a letter telling her about the full-ride scholarship she's won. She won't just pull herself out of poverty, she'll pull her whole family. I see it all, it will happen. The certainty is as wondrous as the wish come true itself.

I could float before her on fairy wings, waving my magic wand, and it would be the same.

My hands shaking, I remove the tiara. The gold holds the warmth from sitting on my head. Maybe I've imagined it. Maybe it's all in my head. I've been working at that place too long. It's starting to make me think I can change the world.

For a week, I put on the tiara every night. I see the wishes, I know their outcomes. I help a girl in the suburbs find her lost cat. I convince a middle-aged woman to walk out of her abusive marriage. I find a winning lottery ticket for a harried mother of three. Another girl wins a beauty pageant. I see the scenes play out as if I stand in the middle of them. I am invisible and omniscient.

Better, I move through my days like I believe. Yes, I can make a difference. Yes, dreams do come true. I believe in fairy godmothers. I think back to my own life, to the dream that made me drive to L.A. with nothing more than what I could fit in my trunk and pushed me through the door of every audition. Each step of the way there'd been a little voice whispering, *You can do this.*

I thought it had been ambition. Maybe there'd been something more. Something to explain why I'd taken the steps and my friends hadn't. I wear that tiara and I hear that same voice whisper, *You can do this.*

A doctor marries the artist her wealthy family disapproves of.

A lawyer in Manhattan quits her job and moves to the Bahamas to be a tour guide.

And one little girl gets a pony for Christmas.

I wave my magic wand and shower the world with stars.

"Maddie, are you okay?"

I blink at her, aware suddenly that Audrey has asked the question several times. "Yeah, I'm sorry, I guess I was daydreaming."

"I couldn't tell," she says with a wry grin. "A bunch of us are going out, you want to come?"

"No, thanks. Too much to do."

"Come on, you haven't been out with us in weeks."

That long? I think about it and can't remember when I'd last been out with the group. I try to imagine going out with them now, sitting at the end of the table or bar, staring into space, barely eating. Not really belonging. I have better things to do.

"I'm afraid I wouldn't be very good company tonight. Next time for sure."

She gives me a look like she doesn't believe me.

Forcing a smile, I wave them off, then rush home, back to my real work.

During the day, I see the faces of a thousand children, and I don't see them anymore. I look for the stories, for the wishes hiding behind their eyes. When Paige—the small plump woman with the big eyes who wears a white wig and draws in wrinkles around her eyes so she can play the fairy godmother—waves her wand and asks the children to make a wish, what do they imagine, and is it something I can see? What will the tiara show me?

A family with children gets off the streets in time for Christmas.

An overlooked youngest daughter gets the lead in the school play.

A battered woman presses charges.

I move through my days like a ghost. No matter how many women and girls I see through the tiara, there are always more. The scenes never slow, never stop. I think if I do this enough, if I work hard enough, I'll make all the wishes come true.

It's bound to happen, sooner or later, that I see someone I recognize. Someone I know, at least a little.

The scene is a hospital bed. On the table beside the bed is a picture of a deathly sick little girl in a wheelchair. Beside her kneels a beautiful Cinderella in a blue satin gown, holding her hand, smiling brilliantly for the camera. That isn't me, I tell myself. That's a character. In the bed lies Abby, a ventilator protruding from her mouth and taped in place, a dozen wires trailing from her body. A monitor beeps, very slowly. Beside the bed sits her aunt, Christine, leaning her elbows on the mattress beside the wasted body, her hands clasped and head bowed in prayer.

The scene is a hospital bed. On the table beside the bed is a picture of a deathly sick little girl in a wheelchair. Beside her kneels a beautiful Cinderella in a blue satin gown, holding her hand.

Christine is making a wish: *Please God, take me instead.*

I grab the tiara off my head so quickly it tangles in my hair. Heart racing, I throw it on the floor, stare at it. A dryness makes my eyes hurt.

Afraid to touch it, I leave it on the floor for a week, giving it a wide berth as I move around the apartment in the course of my day. My muscles ache with fear, even as some small sense tells me that the wish hasn't been granted.

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Joy Is the Serious Business of Heaven

Any large organization has its share of red tape and bureaucracy. Sometimes it can take an act of God to cut through it.

BY DAVID E. LEVINE · ILLUSTRATION BY DAVID LEONARD

Free will was a wonderful thing; why did they have to squander it so? It was like watching a beautiful bird, which could fly anywhere it wanted, return again and again to an ugly patch of dirt.

Monday. The angel Umiel was trying to finish writing a Customer Research Report when her screen beeped. Again. It was an epistle from Ganiel, her supervisor: would she please update her monthly budget figures? Today? By 11:00?

Umiel looked at the clock in the corner of her Illuminated User Interface—the little hand was on the X and the big hand was on the IIII—and sighed. She considered asking Ganiel if this budget thing was absolutely necessary, but she knew what the answer would be: all priorities are top priorities, it's your job to manage your own time, et cetera, et cetera, et blah blah blah.

The morning was not going well. She decided to take an ambrosia break.

Umiel took her halo from its hook and walked down the corridor to her friend Imaliel's cubicle. Umiel and Imaliel had both worked in the Customer Research department of New Product Development since ... well, since forever. She knocked on the pearly wall next to the doorway—no door, of course, not for a mere Research Associate—and said "Morning, Ima. Ambrosia?"

"Love some," he replied, donning his halo. He'd chosen a burnished brass halo today, which complemented his wiry red hair.

As they walked down the corridor, Imaliel waved at some of the other angels, going about their business in their cubicles or other corridors. Umiel was secretly annoyed at Imaliel for this; it pointed out that he could see over the cubicle walls. She was on the short side herself, with black hair and a perky upturned nose. She didn't like the nose—she thought it made her look too much like someone not to be taken seriously—and she really didn't like the height. The offices of Heaven were infinite in extent, of course, but if you couldn't see over the walls your horizons could be awfully limited.

At the ambrosia bar, Imaliel ordered a double tall with extra nectar; Umiel took hers cold, with milk and honey. "Did you hear the latest market share data?" Imaliel said. "The Competition's up to sixty-six percent."

Umiel got a little glum as she considered the news. The Corporation had been losing market share, and staff, to the Competition for years. Even the CEO of the Competition had once been a Corporation employee. "Why do mortals keep buying misery, anyway?" she asked. "Everyone knows we have a superior product. Comparison tests show that humans prefer joy to misery nine to one in blind testing."

"Marketing," said Imaliel. "If our Marketing department were selling honey, they'd call it 'bee secretions.'"

"Oh, thank you very much," said Umiel, pushing away her cup. "I wonder what Management is going to do about this?"

"I heard a rumor that the Archangel Michael was going to come down here and yank some halos if the sales figures didn't perk up. He's really pushing that ISO 999 program, too."

Umiel made a face at that.

Later, back in her cubicle, Umiel paused in her writing to reexamine some of the research data she'd collected. She was doing customer research into consumption of ice cream, part of a larger study of "happiness foods" worldwide that was intended to reveal general trends in human behavior and priorities. But there was some anomalous data in the U.S. Midwest that had been niggling at her for days.

Umiel stared at the graph. The other graphs were nice and tidy, showing a clear preference for certain flavors in each geographic sector. But there was some low-level noise in the Midwest that made its graph look sloppy.

Breaking the graph up into smaller and smaller geographic areas showed that the source of the noise was a Handy Mart in Whitefish Bay, Wisconsin. Looking at the actual sales figures, she saw that the store had sold exactly one carton each of a wide variety of flavors, including some of the most obscure. Could this be an error?

She decided to review the original data. Opening a window on the mortal world, she scrolled through the last month in that particular store, watching the freezer where the ice cream was kept ... and discovered one person who came in every day at noon and bought one small carton of ice cream. A different flavor every day. In alphabetical order.

Her name was Janine Pirelli. She was an attractive fourteen-year-old blonde with a huge crush on one of her classmates, one Vincent Bronowski. Umiel had never seen such intense unrequited love; she had to enlarge the window three times before the entire meter would display. Vincent, of course, didn't know Janine existed.

Umiel wanted to reach through the window and take away the pain. She could do it, too. But humans had free will; they had to make their own decisions and live with the consequences. Umiel sighed and factored the Handy Mart on Silver Spring Drive out of the graph.

She made good progress on her report after that, and might have finished it that day—except that Ganiel asked her for an interim status report, which took most of the afternoon.

Tuesday. Umiel knocked tentatively on Ganiel's door. "You wanted to see me?"

"Yes, please, do come in. Sit down."

Ganiel, gray-haired and severe, sat behind a desk stacked with management books. *Management the Mussolini Way. Seven Hundred Habits of Highly Organized People. The One Second Manager. Effecutronix!,* whatever that was, complete with exclamation point. *Improving Efficiency Through Nanomanagement. Consulting Your Inner Skipper: The Gilligan's Island Management Program.* And a big binder labeled ISO 999.

Ganiel picked up the book that lay open on the desk before her: *Embracing Change for Change's Sake.* "As you know, Umiel," she said, "everyone in the modern organization has to embrace rapid change in order to succeed in today's fast-moving environment. So I'm promoting you from Research Associate to Researcher, effective immediately."

Umiel's halo suddenly felt tight. "Um, thank you," she sputtered.

"I'm really honored. But I'm sure someone else would—"

"Tut tut, my dear, I have every confidence in you. Empower Yourself!"

"Empowerment was last week, ma'am."

"Oh, yes, terribly sorry. I meant, Embrace Change! Now, good day. Coriel will explain your new duties."

"But Ganiel—"

"Good day."

Coriel, Ganiel's assistant, was a brisk, businesslike angel who provided Umiel with the files, papers, and manuals she would need in her new job. "No more of that tedious watching mortals for you!" he said as he stacked more and more papers into her hands. "No more writing those Customer Research Reports!"

"But I like watching mortals," Umiel said quietly as the papers piled up to her chin. Then, more audibly, with an attempt at cheerfulness: "What will I be doing?"

"You'll be writing Summary Customer Research Reports, of course, based on the Customer Research Reports provided by your Associates. You'll forward the Archangels' latest pronouncements to your staff. And you'll be responsible for your work group's budget, daily status updates, and weekly robe damage reports."

"But that's all just paperwork!"

"Welcome to the big leagues," he said, not without sympathy. "Now, go Embrace Change!"

"Thank you," she said miserably.

Umiel met with her new staff that morning, and read the relevant verses of the corporate manual over lunch (turkey breast on white bread, with a glass of milk and a slice of angel food cake). In the afternoon she started work in earnest.

Though she tried to throw herself into writing Summary Customer Research Reports—she did enjoy a new challenge, she kept telling herself—she found she was constantly interrupted by e-pistles, encyclicals, and e-dicts that all had to be acknowledged, forwarded, replied to, refiled, deleted, and/or stared at in bafflement. Some of them were little more than collections of acronyms held together with jargon. Before she knew it, it was 7:30, and she hadn't written more than a page of her first report. At least the flow of messages had flowed to a trickle.

Embrace Change, she told herself, and with a package of Sno-Balls from the vending machine for her dinner, she settled in to write. But after the first couple of hours she found it incredibly boring. All she was doing was repeating her staff's reports in fewer words. She couldn't even look at the original data.

Frustrated, bored, and lonely, she opened a window on the mortal world and located Janine Pirelli. It was noon in Whitefish Bay, and she was making her daily purchase: Tin Roof Sundae. Umiel wondered what she would do if she got to the end of the alphabet and still had a crush on Vincent Bronowski. Free will was a wonderful thing; why did they have to squander it so? It was like watching a beautiful bird, which could fly anywhere it wanted, return again and again to an ugly patch of dirt.

Just then a shadow fell across Umiel's screen. She looked up to see Ganiel hovering over her, a copy of *Management by Flying Around* tucked in her belt. "Very dedicated, Umiel," she said. "What are you working on at this hour?"

"I'm not working on anything at the moment, ma'am. I'm just looking in on this one mortal."

"Umiel, my dear, you are not Embracing Change. You are no longer merely an Associate, after all. Direct research is beneath you."

"Yes, ma'am."

As Ganiel flew away, Umiel got up to get a vanilla ice cream from the vending machine.

Wednesday. Umiel heard a tap on the wall outside her cubicle. She looked up, bleary-eyed, to find Ganiel standing in her doorway.

"Ganiel! Uh ..." Umiel quickly buried the Form 31 she'd been working on under some other papers. "Please have a seat." But her guest chair was already occupied by the huge stack of papers Coriel had given her. "Um, here." She gave up her own chair and perched on the edge of her desk.

"Thank you," Ganiel said, sitting. She took off her half-spectacles with an exaggerated sigh. "Umiel, dear, I'm afraid you haven't yet hit your stride as a Researcher."

Umiel said a quick prayer of thanks under her breath. "I'm terribly sorry, ma'am, and I thank you for giving me the opportunity, but I'm actually quite glad to be going back to an Associate—"

"Oh, no! No, not at all!" She produced a laugh. "What you need is not a demotion, but better training and encouragement." She placed a book on Umiel's desk, pushing aside a pile of empty ice cream containers to do so. It was titled *Non-Euclidean Management.* "Once you've read this, you and your staff will form a Non-Euclidean Management Matrix and will function much more smoothly."

"But Ganiel, I can barely keep up with my e-pistles!"

"Remember, Umiel, as a full Researcher, you are expected to prioritize your own time as well as that of your Associates. Speaking of which, I'm sure you have much to do." And with a cheery "good day," she left.

Umiel opened the book to the end. It was seven hundred and thirty-four pages long.

She allowed herself to rest her forehead on the edge of her desk for five seconds. Then she began to read.

She was still at it when Imaliel stopped in on his way out the door. "Hey, Umi, what're you reading?"

She held up the book so he could see the title. "Listen to this: 'When the Excellent Performer is properly matrixed with the rest of the Team, other Performers in the Team will be empowered as well, resulting in Five-Dimensional Synergy.'"

"Wow. That's ... quite something."

"Yeah. And I've been reading it all afternoon. The scary thing is, it's beginning to make sense."

"So are you heading home? It's quitting time."

"No, I promised myself I'd read at least half of it before I left, and I've got"—she looked at her screen—"five hundred and sixty-one messages to process after that."

"Well, don't work too hard."

"Thanks. But don't be too surprised if you come in tomorrow and find I've gone over to the Competition."

"Don't even joke about that! If you get stressed, try to make time for yourself."

"I will." But she didn't leave the office until 11:00.

She left behind a notepad covered with pictures of ice cream cones, ice cream bars, and ice cream sundaes. She was getting tired of vanilla. At least Janine Pirelli had a choice of flavors.

Thursday. Umiel tried to apply the principles of Non-Euclidean Management to her staff. She really did. But whether it was lack of sleep, or failure to comprehend the theory, or her own inability to communicate, everything she tried just collapsed in her hands like a soggy cake cone.

By the time she saw Ganiel leaving that night, she was sure she'd made a hopeless mess of her whole work group. What had been a reasonably well-functioning group of individual Research Associates now seemed to be a tangled five-dimensional hairball of Sub-Par

Performers. The worst part was, she knew she had done it herself and she had no idea how it had happened. And she was even farther behind on her messages, and hadn't touched her Summary Customer Research Report since Tuesday.

After Ganiel left she looked in on Janine Pirelli, just to remind herself what the job was all about. Janine was sitting in her high-school chemistry class, writing the word "Vincent" over and over, in elaborate script, in her notebook. Why were humans so efficient when it came to selecting and purchasing the Competition's product? Umiel wondered. If only we could be as efficient in delivering joy to them. She returned to her messages.

She decided to call it quits at midnight, although there were still nearly a hundred e-pistles left in her inbox. As she walked through the empty, infinite corridors, she realized she was unhappy. Miserable, in fact. *How can this be?* she thought. *I'm an angel, and here I am buying a Competition product!*

She sat down in the middle of the corridor, and stayed there for a long time, thinking about how she'd gotten into this situation and what, if anything, she could do about it.

Finally she stood up and walked to another department. The Records Office was closed at this hour, of course, but the forms were all neatly racked on the wall outside the office. It didn't take her long to find the one she needed—she'd filled out Form 31 many times before, though she'd never actually gone so far as to submit one. But this time she read it over twice, bit her lip, signed at the bottom, and slipped it in the slot.

It might take a thousand years or more to be processed, and there was no guarantee of acceptance, but at least she'd done something.

Friday. Umiel, her staff, and all of Ganiel's other direct and indirect reporters were called to a meeting at 9:00 sharp. Ganiel stood at the front of the large meeting room, pointing to a screen that was hidden from the diminutive Umiel by a forest of wings and halos. She kept trying to hop up and see, without being so rude as to flap in an enclosed space.

Ganiel said, "I have just spoken with the Archangel Michael, who feels that our work has an excellent chance of regaining some of the ground lost on the Internet project. I am pleased to announce that he will be coming to this department for a visitation." She paused. "At 3:00 today." There was considerable consternation at that.

"Furthermore," Ganiel said when the crowd had settled down, "I intend to take this opportunity to demonstrate to Michael our commitment to the ISO 999 program." She held up the fat binder Umiel had seen on her desk, to renewed muttering. "If you aren't familiar with it, the Immaculate Seraphim Order's corporate standard number 999 is a quality program that requires all processes to be properly documented, and all procedures to conform to the documented processes."

Umiel raised her voice. "We can't possibly conform to ISO 999 by 3:00 today!" There was a choir of agreement.

Ganiel smiled. "No, of course not. But we can document all our processes, albeit in an abbreviated fashion. I have prepared a simple one-page form, which Coriel will hand to you as you leave. Take as many copies as you need, and fill out one form for each separate process you follow in your daily work. I will collect them and present them to Michael at 3:00. Good day!"

The entire department became a whirl of activity. Umiel found herself trying to simultaneously prepare an illuminated homily about her work group's status for Ganiel to present to Michael, answer her staff's questions about the ISO 999 forms (such as "What's the difference between a process and a procedure?"), and fill out her own forms. And the flood of messages didn't slow; in fact, it increased, with all the questions to be answered and details to be arranged for Michael's visit.

Umiel had a report in her lap, a manual on her desk, papers all over the floor, and a pencil in her mouth when Coriel knocked at her doorway. "Michael's here. Gather your staff; we're all meeting in the large conference room in ten minutes."

Umiel practically bit through the pencil. "Michael's here already?" She looked at her clock: it was 3:10. And she hadn't even had lunch. She put a last few touches on the homily, tucked it under her wing, and dashed out to tell her staff.

Red-faced, she returned a moment later for her halo.

The Archangel Michael was a huge, leonine angel with wavy black hair, a gray-shot beard, and fiery eyes. A gold pin with the scales and sword, his personal symbols, adorned his chest. Umiel smiled at Michael, and he nodded at her, but she didn't feel it would be appropriate to introduce herself.

Ganiel introduced Michael to the crowd, pointed out a few key employees (not including Umiel) to Michael, and then began her presentation. "I know that ISO 999 is very important to Management," Ganiel said to Michael, while Coriel brought three thick binders up to the podium. A few stray sheets had been stuffed into them at the last moment; one came out and fluttered to the floor. "We have prepared these interim process reports to show you how important it is to us."

Michael picked up one of the binders, leafed through it. "Not very important, it seems," he said. "These forms appear to have been prepared in great haste." He set the binder down. "However, I acknowledge that they represent your intent to adhere to the program. Now, tell me about your research."

Ganiel was visibly taken aback. Umiel knew that she had allotted the entire first hour of the meeting to the presentation and discussion of the binders. "Yes. Well. My staff have prepared a few illuminated homilies ..." She placed the first homily in the projector upside-down.

As the presentation went on, Michael's face grew darker and darker. It was clear that the homilies had taken a back seat to the ISO 999 forms. Some of them didn't even have the gold leaf on the illuminations. It was also clear that Ganiel had never seen them before. After half an hour of this, before Umiel's homily had even been presented, Michael stood up in the projector's beam and interrupted Ganiel in mid-mumble.

"Why are you wasting my time with this half-hearted nonsense? When you invited me here, I expected you to be prepared!" A low mutter ran through the crowd.

Ganiel's face was shiny with sweat. "I apologize for the poor quality of the homilies. But when I learned yesterday about the ISO 999 review coming Monday, I thought it would be a good opportunity to bring my department to your attention. Especially with the budget discussions next week."

"My dear incarnated friend Confucius once said that 'may you come to the attention of your superiors' is a curse. I'm inclined to agree with him. Especially with the budget discussions next week. In fact, this half-hearted attempt at ISO compliance makes me wonder if you even deserve the budget you've got."

Ganiel paled. "In accordance with the principles of Embracing Change and Non-Euclidean Management—"

Michael banged his fist on the table. "Enough of that faddish twaddle! Have you all forgotten that ISO compliance is only a means to an end? There's no point in documenting procedures if the procedures don't serve the goal of bringing people joy!"

Ganiel stood stricken. Michael glared at her and at the crowd.

Into the silence, Umiel spoke. "We haven't forgotten the goal, sir." Startled at the sound of her own voice, she added more quietly,

The Archangel

Michael was a huge, leonine angel with wavy black hair, a gray-shot beard, and fiery eyes. A gold pin with the scales and sword, his personal symbols, adorned his chest.

"Well, we've tried not to."

"I see no evidence of this!" Michael said, shielding his eyes from the light so he could see who was speaking. "Your homilies are entirely inadequate."

"Well, sir," Umiel replied, her voice strengthening again, "maybe we gave them only the attention they really deserved."

Michael's eyes picked Umiel out of the crowd. "What's your name, child?"

Umiel had to swallow twice before she could answer. "Umiel, sir."

Michael stepped out of the projector's light, seeming to shrink to normal size. "And what do you have to do that's more important than these homilies?" He seemed genuinely interested in the answer.

"Well, sir, I'm researching customer preferences in ice cream." She started to describe her last Customer Research Report, but before one word came out of her mouth she stopped herself and started over. "There's a young woman in Whitefish Bay, Wisconsin, sir. She's a devoted consumer of the Competition's products ... but she also eats ice cream. She buys a different flavor every day. It's a small thing, sir, but I feel that this small pleasure keeps her going. And one day she'll realize that Unrequited Love is just empty angst, and Self-Doubt is cheap and bitter, and she'll search the shelves for something more satisfying. That's when we'll get her as a steady customer. But we have to keep providing her with ice cream until then, or we could lose her completely." Suddenly she realized that everyone was looking at her. "Sir."

Michael stroked his beard with one finger. "At least there's one angel in this department who knows what her real job is." He looked at her a moment more, then nodded decisively. "Right. Umiel, I'm promoting you to Ganiel's position, effective immediately."

"No!" Umiel started to shout, but immediately clapped her hands over her mouth. But then, after a little thought, she lowered her hands to her sides and repeated, more calmly, "No, sir. I would not be a good replacement."

Michael's eyebrows drew together in disapproval. "And do you have a better suggestion?"

"Coriel, sir." At the sound of his name Coriel looked up, startled. "He's the one who really takes care of Ganiel's day-to-day responsibilities. If he were in charge, the Researchers and Research Associates could do their jobs without interference."

Ganiel stood stricken, mouth flapping impotently, but though Coriel looked down in modesty, he did not dispute Umiel's assessment of the situation. Then Imaliel began to clap his hands. Others joined in, one by one, and soon the conference room clattered with applause.

Through all this Michael stood, arms folded across his chest and trying to look stern, though a smirk teased at the corner of his mouth. When the applause died down, he shook his head. "Well, Umiel, it seems you have evaded the ranks of management. I wish I could do the same. But what shall we do with you instead? Make you a Research Associate again?"

Umiel swallowed. "Actually, sir, there's something else you can do for me."

The room fell silent. All eyes were on her.

"I submitted a Form 31 last night. If you could please flag it for accelerated evaluation ..."

Someone in the crowd gasped. Perhaps it was Imaliel.

Michael stepped forward and took Umiel's hands. "You truly wish to incarnate? To trade your immortality for a single lifetime on Earth?"

Umiel nodded once, definitively. "Yes, sir. I don't fit in with the bureaucracy ... I never have. I need to be someplace where I can bring joy one-on-one. And I know just where, and when, I want to start."

Michael closed his eyes and lowered his head. "As you wish."

Saturday. It was a beautiful late-spring day in Whitefish Bay, Wisconsin. The sun was shining from a blue sky with a few light, fluffy clouds. It was the first really warm day of the season; school would soon be out for the summer.

An ice cream truck was parked on a residential street, recorded chimes pealing from horns on its roof. It was the first one of the season. Little kids on their way home from school clustered around the truck, bringing quarters and dollars and coming away with frozen treats and happy faces.

Two teenage girls came walking down the street, book bags on their backs, giggling conspiratorially together. "Hey look!" said the one with black hair. "An ice cream truck!" She took off running.

"I want a Bomb Pop!" the blonde called after her. Her bag was heavier and she didn't speed up.

When the first girl arrived at the truck, she scanned the colorful menu pasted next to the service window. "What's this?" she asked, pointing.

The driver, a pimply teenage boy, was clearly far more interested in a girl his own age than any of his younger customers. "It's a brand new flavor," he said with studied nonchalance. "Kind of tart, kind of sweet. You'll like it."

"Okay, two of those." She ripped open the paper wrapper on one, licking at the purple ice cream as she walked back to her friend. "They didn't have any Bomb Pops, so I got you this. It's new."

It took her a moment to accept it. She was staring at the driver, who was looking curiously back at her. "Hey Umi ..."

"Yeah, Jen?"

"Isn't that Vincent Bronowski, from school?"

"Yeah."

She giggled and turned away. "He looks like a real dork in that hat." She pulled the wrapper off her ice cream and took a taste. "Not bad. What was it called again?"

The girl with black hair wiped purple off her lower lip and grinned. "Zenobiaberry."

They walked on together, licking at their ice creams.

And on the seventh day, she rested. ❧

The River of three Crossings

BY RICHARD PARKS ▲ ILLUSTRATION BY TIFFANY PROTHERO

The ways of ghosts can be mysterious and frightening to the average person. But Lord Yamada is anything but average.

It is the custom in many families to give the recently deceased a new name, in the belief that the dead person's spirit will be less likely to return to plague the living if not called back by the name it remembers in life.

I've never known this to work, and least of all with the one who in life was known as the bandit "Tadeshi the Red." When he chose to haunt the river crossing south of the Capital where his worst crimes were committed, he could often be heard bellowing his name for all to hear. Just as Kenji and I were hearing it now. Tadeshi did not seem in the least bit of doubt as to his proper name.

"Lord Yamada, do you see him?" Kenji asked.

"I see a blue flame moving rapidly through the bamboo grove on the other bank," I said. "Unless I am greatly mistaken, that is Tadeshi."

"He's mobile. That will make exorcism difficult," said the priest. "I can try to summon him, but for that we'd need some personal item of his. I don't know of any such."

An obvious but fair assessment. How could a thief own anything if all that he acquired really belonged to someone else? Nearly everything in Tadeshi's possession when his hideout had been discovered by the district governor's bushi had been either returned to the original owners or, if circumstances prevented, their families. What few items remained unaccounted for had been donated to a local temple, according to the headman of the village at the Uji River bridge.

I thought of those items. "What about the loot that was given to the temple?"

"A lady's ivory comb and a bolt of blue fabric? I rather doubt either of them belonged to Tadeshi," Kenji said.

In truth, that did not seem likely. The comb aside, the fabric seemed destined for a lady's kimono, not the rough garb of a bandit. I sighed. "No one promised us an easy time of this. Let's go." I made for the bridge and Kenji followed.

The moon was full and high in the sky that night. I paused to admire it briefly and Kenji sighed. "We didn't come to Uji to do our moon-viewing. We could have done that back in Kyoto."

"Yes, but we didn't. So I'll do it here, thank you. It's not as if this will make much difference."

I knew that Kenji shared my bleak assessment of our chances, but at least he kept his attention on business. I tried to do the same and now followed as he took the lead across the bridge to the other side of the river.

The sutras that Kenji had prepared for us would keep the ghost from detecting us as long as we moved quietly, but there was no way the ghost would not realize that an exorcism was being performed once Kenji had begun the rite. A chant done in a whisper is no chant at all. Either Tadeshi would have to cooperate with his own exorcism, or we would have to figure out some way to confine him until Kenji could complete the rite, and there are few things more difficult than confining a ghost who does not wish to be confined.

Once in the bamboo grove, moving quietly was not really an option. The canes grew both tall and thick, and sometimes there was no way through except to force our way. All the time the blue flame that marked Tadeshi's presence kept just ahead of us. I was beginning to think the ghost was simply toying with us when we finally reached a clearing near the water.

"I smell scented smoke," Kenji whispered.

So did I. The blue flame had now resolved itself into the outline of a large, fierce man with red hair. The rumor was that Tadeshi had the blood of the northern barbarians in him; that much appeared to have been true. My attention just then was on another flame in the clearing. A smaller flame, with a small figure kneeling in front of it. In another moment the ghost of Tadeshi the Red disappeared.

"Che ...."

I heard Kenji's frustration; it was an echo of my own. Apparently the person who had been burning incense to draw in the spirit of Tadeshi had heard it too. I slipped through the last of the bamboo canes and ran full speed after the girl, now that I could see her clearly enough to ascertain her sex. Fortunately for us, her kimono was not made for running. I caught her wrist before she had taken half a dozen steps.

"Let me go!"

"I think not. Certainly not before you've explained what you're doing here."

I examined my squirming catch as Kenji caught up. She couldn't have been more than nine or ten years of age. Her face was dirty, and her kimono was faded but of good quality. It was her hair that caught my attention most of all. It wasn't entirely black. Even in the weak light, I could see highlights of deep red.

"Master Kenji," I said, "I do believe something that belonged to the late Tadeshi has just fallen into our hands."

"What are you talking about?"

"Unless I miss my guess ..."

"My name is Momiji," the girl said. She was defiant, even as she stopped struggling. "I am the bandit Tadeshi's daughter."

The messenger had come from Uji while Kenji and I were discussing an obscure point of Buddhist philosophy. That is, the old reprobate of a priest was explaining why his drinking and womanizing did not endanger his future Enlightenment, while my own drinking and comparative celibacy would surely be my downfall. I was about to show him how "downfall" was a relative term to one who was about to be tossed over a railing when I noticed the man kneeling out on the veranda of the Widow Tamahara's establishment.

"Lord Yamada? I have been sent by his Excellency the District Governor of Uji to seek your help."

I let go of Kenji's robe, and we both listened while the messenger explained the situation. It was well known that the river crossing at Uji south of the Capital had long been a haunt for bandits waylaying travelers on the road to Nara. It was well suspected that the villagers, if not actually complicit, had turned a blind eye to the banditry for years. Yet the appointment of a new district governor from the Minamoto Clan with a large contingent of Minamoto bushi to back him up had altered traditional views among the villagers. Especially, I understood, after a few summary executions. After that the governor had been quite successful in suppressing the bandit activity. The capture and public execution of Tadeshi the Red had been of particular moment, and the governor had made certain to report his triumph to the Imperial Government.

He had been less eager to report, it seemed, that the ghost of Tadeshi the Red now refused to leave.

"What of the priests of the local temples?" Kenji asked.

"Useless," said the messenger. "All their chants and prayers have had no effect. His Excellency knows your reputation and requests both your aid ... and your discretion."

"If he truly knows my reputation, he understands that such help comes at a price."

The man smiled. "My master is prepared to offer three full casks of uncooked rice, plus gold to the weight of ten Chinese coins."

I saw Kenji's eyes widen slightly. I hope my own countenance was more reserved, but I could not be certain. "You may tell His Excellency that I accept."

After the messenger departed, I turned to Kenji. "Uji beckons. When can you be ready?"

"I don't recall being asked," Kenji said primly.

"Consider that done. We can discuss your share later," I said. "But when dealing with ghosts, I've found that a priest totally without scruple is often a useful thing."

Which explained why we both stood, two days later, in the chilly night air trying to summon a troublesome ghost using a ten-year-old girl as bait. This was not a situation I had considered beforehand.

The blue flame had now resolved itself into the outline of a large, fierce man with red hair. The rumor was that Tadeshi had the blood of the northern barbarians in him; that much appeared to have been true.

Kenji's low drone of a chant was starting to fade into the background, like the sound of running water to one who lived by the river. Momiji kneeled in front of the rekindled fire, looking bored.

"He's not coming, you know," Momiji said. "If you think you can compel him because of me, sir, you are mistaken."

"Oh? Then why did he appear when you burned incense to his spirit?"

"Because I am his daughter and showed him respect. He had little of that in his life, I think. Fear, certainly. Not respect. He didn't even have a proper funeral."

"Then maybe we can arrange one."

She looked away. "That would be good."

"But it wouldn't send him away, would it? Why won't he leave, Momiji? You know it's not right that he remain in the mortal world," I said.

"My father was a thief and a murderer, they tell me. I understand little of what is right and wrong. I only understand that he loved my mother, and in his way, he loved me. That is what I know."

I glanced at Kenji, who finally stopped his chant. "No sign of him," Kenji said.

"Perhaps it is time we returned Momiji to her mother," I said.

"She died last year," Momiji said. "So, unless you plan to kill me...?"

I frowned. "Certainly not."

"Do not concern yourselves about my father, gentlemen. He will cross the Sanzu in his own good time. He's not ready."

"Why not? What are you not telling us, Momiji?"

Momiji didn't answer, and I sighed. "Child, we are not your enemies. Your father is dead. It is past time he joined the dead. That is what we want as well, and it is all we want."

"Not yet," she said, and that is all she would say.

I glanced at Kenji, who said, "We will escort the young lady to her home."

"I can find my own way," she said.

"No doubt," I said, "but it's no time of night for a child to be roaming alone. And I'm not ruling out the fact that we may still need your aid in this matter. I want to know where to find you."

The girl shrugged but made no other objection. We followed her back across the main bridge to the village. Her house was on the outskirts near the river. The house was little more than a hut; the best one could say for it was that it seemed in a decent state of repair.

"How do you live, Momiji?" I asked.

"My mother was a laundress, and I've taken over at least some of her work. I wash clothes in the river. Fish a bit, too—my father taught me that. I can take care of myself."

"No doubt," I said. "Though it must have been hard to lose both of your parents."

"Everyone dies," Momiji said. "There's no help for it."

Kenji grunted. "Remember what I said, girl. We may wish to speak to you again."

She waved at the poor hut. "Then you know where to find me. Now, if you will excuse me?" Momiji went into her hovel and shut the door. We could plainly hear a wooden bar being slid into place.

"She's rather pretty," Kenji said, "in a wild and unrefined sort of way."

I scowled. "Kenji ..."

Kenji let out a gusting sigh. "Oh, honestly, Lord Yamada—even I have standards. But consider how complicated her life is liable to become in the next few years. Especially with no family and no one to protect her."

"That sounded almost like concern."

"As a priest, I am concerned with the physical and spiritual well-being of all people."

"You're more concerned about collecting our fee, and at the moment this child seems to have us at an impasse. She said that Tadeshi would cross the Sanzu when he was ready. I think she knows why he is not."

"That's easy—fear," Kenji said.

"Fear? What do you mean?"

Kenji looked disgusted. "Lord Yamada, if you'd spent even a reasonable amount of time on the religious studies suitable to your station, you'd understand very well what that means. Do you even know what the Sanzu River is?"

"It's the river that separates the land of the living from the land of the dead," I said, because I did know that much. "In order to be judged by the King of Hell and pass into the afterlife, a soul must cross it. That is what Momiji was referring to."

"Yes, but the river is called "san zu" because it is the river of three crossings: a bridge, a shallow ford, and a deep, serpent-infested passage. Where you cross depends on the weight of your sins."

"So I'm guessing Tadeshi will have to wade through the snakes?"

"Almost certainly. It's no mystery that a man with as many crimes on his soul as Tadeshi would hesitate to make the crossing."

I thought of Tadeshi's daughter and the look in her eyes when she spoke of him. "Somehow I doubt that. I think there's another reason. I still believe Momiji knows what that reason is."

"Assuming you are correct, Lord Yamada, how do you propose to make her tell us?"

"I have no idea," I said. But if we were going to fulfill our charge to banish the ghost of Tadeshi the Red, I knew I'd better find an idea, and soon.

Early the next morning Kenji and I were summoned to a private meeting with Minamoto no Hideki, the district governor. I knew better than to believe that this was purely a social invitation.

Hideki received us warmly on the veranda of his house. He was perhaps thirty, intense and vigorous as befit his reputation. His walled compound was just outside the village of Uji. The sun had not yet risen over the treetops, and he invited us to join him in awaiting its arrival. Our timing was good, and we did not wait long.

"A lovely sunrise, gentlemen, don't you think?" he said.

"Exquisite, Your Excellency," I said, as Kenji made similar noises of appreciation and we both waited as patiently as we could for the real reason we were there. Not that it wasn't a fine sunrise, but sunsets and moonrise had always appealed to me more. Mostly because they did not require one to arise at such an early hour. It was all I could do to keep from yawning, and I noted with some amusement that Kenji had to stifle more than one such yawn himself. If this wasn't perfectly obvious to Minamoto-sama, I would have been amazed.

"My sources tell me you had an encounter with the bandit's ghost on your first night here," he said. "Last evening?"

I didn't know who his sources were, but I couldn't dispute their accuracy. "A very brief one, Excellency. Master Kenji and I were trying to assess the situation."

"And have you made your assessment?"

"It will be difficult, Excellency. I don't think this comes as a surprise to you."

He almost smiled then. "Hardly. I've had teams of priests falling over themselves in the darkness for the past month. All they have to show for it so far are muddy feet and a few cases of fleas."

Kenji spoke up. "If you don't mind my asking, Excellency, why is the removal of this one ghost so important? Now that the bandits have been mostly driven out, one pitiful wraith does not seem like such a threat."

Hideki looked thoughtful. "At the moment he is no threat at all. I'm more concerned about what happens when my assignment ends."

"I don't understand," Kenji said.

I thought I did, but better to hear it from Hideki himself, and after a pause he obliged.

"Last winter a nephew of the Emperor himself was robbed and humiliated just south of the bridge as he journeyed to Nara on pilgrimage. The bandits on the southern road had been a nuisance for years, but now the situation had become intolerable."

I had not heard of that, but was not surprised that I had not. Such an insult would have been kept as quiet as possible. People might think the Emperor's government was enfeebled if it could not con-

trol the roads this close to the Capital.

"My charge was clear," Hideki continued. "Achieving the cooperation of the townsfolk was not easy, but soon they came to see that doing so was in their best interests. I made examples as needed, and my strategy worked. We have identified and either killed or apprehended the worst offenders."

"Your success has been remarkable," Kenji said. "Yet that does not explain the problem with the ghost."

"The problem with the ghost is the problem with Uji itself," Hideki said. "Banditry was a way of life in this village, either actively pursued or tolerated, for centuries. While I am reasonably satisfied with my progress, I fear that the only way to settle the problem for good would be to execute every man, woman, and child in Uji and burn the place to the ground."

"You would not do that!" Kenji exclaimed, momentarily forgetting himself, but Hideki didn't even blink.

"Priest, I would do that if this village did not serve too useful a function as a traveler's station. The next best thing I can do is make certain that the villagers behave themselves for a long time to come. So long as Tadeshi the Red's spirit is not at rest, that is in doubt."

"But he ..." Kenji began, but now I stepped in.

"Banditry was a way of life here, as his Excellency said. Kenji-san, how long do you think it would take for old habits to reassert themselves in this place with Tadeshi's ghost as a constant, even poetic, reminder of defiance to the Emperor's justice? Especially after Lord Minamoto has left?" I turned to the governor. "You are leaving, aren't you? News of your success has no doubt brought an even grander appointment?"

"I am to become Governor of Hisen province," Hideki confirmed. "Once my work here is complete. But for the sake of the Emperor's justice and my own future stability, not until then. That is why I sought your help. Frankly, these people have no cause to love me, nor I them. I do not wish to remain here one day more than I must."

Frankly spoken and reassuring in its way. I knew that Hideki would keep his word if we were successful. I did not want to speculate on what he might do if we were not.

A messenger wearing the Minamoto mon hurried out onto the veranda but kneeled at a discreet distance until Governor Hideki waved him forward with his fan. The messenger whispered in his ear and Hideki scowled. I didn't hear what the Governor said in return, but it apparently was a command that the man wait. The messenger bowed low, then withdrew out of earshot again.

"It seems Tadeshi's influence is already being felt," the governor said. "Though in a most peculiar fashion."

"How so?"

"Tadeshi's wild daughter was caught last night trying to steal from Byodoin Temple. The monks are keeping her confined until I take her into custody. The usual practice was to take from travelers, not townsfolk, and certainly not a holy temple."

"Do you know what she attempted to steal?"

He scowled. "Does that matter? A handful of radishes would have been enough. While a young girl makes a far poorer example than a grown man, I may have little choice."

Before Kenji could step in again, I did. "Your Excellency, forgive me, but I think it would be to your advantage to forego the Emperor's justice in Momiji's case."

He raised an eyebrow. "Oh?"

"You said yourself that her actions were strange, and I agree. Was Byodoin Temple not the place where the remains of Tadeshi's spoils were donated?"

He looked thoughtful. "It was. You think there is a connection?"

"I am certain of it. If you will allow me to take custody of the girl, I think she may be able to help us with the problem of Tadeshi. Certainly that is worth omitting one execution?"

"I'll defer to your judgment in this, Lord Yamada, but I expect results. I think we understand each other?"

I bowed low and Kenji followed. "Of course, Excellency."

The papers giving us custody of Momiji were prepared, and then Kenji and I were given permission to withdraw, and we did so as soon as politely possible. On the road back to Uji, Kenji looked a little unsettled.

"That man frightens me," he said. "I think you've just placed our necks under the sword in place of Momiji's."

"I'm glad that you're paying attention. Not that they were not already there. Even so, I had little choice—I doubt we can make any progress without Momiji's help. Or did you think that such a reward as we were promised was to come without risk?"

"You are a friend of Prince Kanemore, the Crown Prince's own uncle!" Kenji said. "Surely...?"

"I would not count on that," I said dryly. "The Emperor's government understood that Hideki was a man who got things done, or he would not be here. I rather doubt the Emperor is any more concerned about the methods involved than Hideki himself is."

"Then we had better hope that Momiji is in a more cooperative mood today."

"I would not count on that, either," I said.

Byodoin Temple had been an elegant private residence only recently converted by a member of the Fujiwara family for use as a temple.The building was shingon style with a gated wall surrounding a mansion consisting of one main building, now the main sutra reading hall, and two lesser buildings to either side, which served as residences for the monks and abbot. Smaller structures served for storage and workshops and were located behind the main hall. I presented our orders to the monk watching the gate, and he summoned a junior monk to escort us to where Momiji was being kept.

Naturally, Byodoin lacked any formal facility for prisoners. Momiji had been confined in one of the small outlying buildings. We heard her before we reached her. Kenji turned to the young monk. "Has she been like this since she was taken?"

"Not consistently," the boy said. "She stops to rest every now and then."

A board on the outside of the building suddenly thrummed as if struck with a hammer. "Let me out!" Momiji shrieked.

"Good afternoon, Momiji-chan," I said, not very loudly, but loud enough.

The tumult from within the building ceased. "Why are you here?"

"Possibly to save your life. Are you interested?"

"Perhaps," she said.

Kenji scowled at the barred door. "Perhaps we'd be better off leaving you here."

"No doubt that is true," Momiji said, and it was all I could do not to smile.

"I'm not going to speak to you through a door," I said. "I'm going to open this, but only if you promise to behave yourself. Do I have your word?"

"I'm the daughter of a bandit. What good is my word?"

"That's for you to show," I said.

"Then I promise."

Kenji looked skeptical, but I unbarred the door and opened it wide.

If anything, Momiji looked more disheveled than at our first meeting. She had bloodied one fist, apparently banging on the inside of the storeroom. A glance inside told me that the monks had been wise to empty her prison before confining her; it's unlikely anything kept there would have survived the experience.

"Did you honestly think all that banging was going to do any good?" Kenji asked.

"It was all I could do," Momiji said. "So I did it."

While I could fault her method, there wasn't much to question in her reasoning. "Momiji, you were caught stealing the property of Byodoin Temple. You do realize how much trouble you're in?"

"Sir, I have been in nothing else since the day my father was killed. If you're here to cut off my head, I can't stop you. Or do we need to leave the temple grounds for that?"

"We will, if such becomes necessary. That's another thing that's up

to you."

She frowned. "I don't understand."

I turned to the monk. "Young man, when this girl was caught, what was she carrying?"

"Two offerings that had been presented to the temple earlier in the week," he said. "An ivory comb and a bolt of fabric."

"Those belonged to me," Momiji said. "They had no right to take them. And that fat old monk would never have caught me if he'd been meditating like he was supposed to be!"

I spoke to the monk again. "I'm afraid our duties will require that we assume possession of these items as well," I said. "Do I need to speak to the Abbot?"

The young man grinned. "I will ask his will, but if it means this kitsune will be removed from our midst, I do not think he will object." The monk hurried away to confer with the abbot while Momiji frowned.

"I'm not a fox," she said.

I sighed. "No, but you certainly have given these good monks reason to be annoyed with you. If getting called a fox is the worst that happens as a result, count yourself fortunate."

The young man soon returned, carrying the fabric and the comb. "With the Abbot's compliments," he said as he handed them to me. I didn't miss the way Momiji looked at them—like one dying of thirst who has just seen water. "Most gracious. The Abbot may be assured I will put these to good use."

Momiji scowled at me as the monk withdrew. "May I ask what you plan to do with those, and with me?"

"Again, that is up to you. You say these items are your property, Momiji. I am prepared to return them both to you, but on one condition."

"What do I have to do?" she said, looking at the ground.

"You have to tell me why you want them. And don't spin any stories about your rightful property, because you know everything in your father's possession was forfeit. I want the truth."

"You want to send my father to the afterlife," Momiji said.

"Yes, we do," Kenji said gently. "And so should you, Momiji. Or do you wish your poor father's spirit to wander this world forever?"

She looked up. "With his barbarian blood, no one would offer him work. Banditry was all he had; the good citizens of Uji made him a bandit, and so he resolved to be one whose name alone would bring fear. He succeeded. And now if his spirit was truly strong enough to take its revenge on all who had wronged him, I would gladly wish that he remained among the living forever!" She glanced at Kenji and then me. "You did want the truth."

"He's not that strong. Terrible to look at, certainly, and frightening, but not so dangerous as he appears," I said, for I had long known this to be true. Otherwise we would have accounts of deaths, not just terrifying encounters.

"Unfortunately, so of course I want to see him safely out of this wretched place," Momiji said.

"You can't right all the wrongs of this world, Momiji," I said, "but you can right this one. Help us send your father to where he needs to go."

"Why should I trust you?"

"Because we want the same thing."

"You don't know what I want," Momiji said. "Not really. But perhaps we can help each other." She looked at the bolt of cloth and the comb I now held. "The comb was for my mother. She had always wanted a fine ivory comb, but she couldn't afford it. My father promised to get her one. While he was gone, she fell ill. No one would help us, either out of fear of my father or just spite. I don't know. All I know is that she died before he returned."

"What unfortunate woman did he take it from? Or do you know?" Kenji said, and Momiji turned on him as if he'd slapped her.

"He didn't steal it! Mother begged him not to. So he went to Kyoto where no one knew him, and he bought it. Mother died before he could give it to her."

"He wants the comb now, isn't that it? To find your mother in the afterlife and give it to her?"

"To keep his promise," Momiji said. "In his way, he was a man of his word. You can be certain that he will not leave without it."

"What about the cloth?"

"That was my promise," Momiji said. "To my father, that he would have a fine yukata for his funeral. Something more than the rough clothes he always wore. I'm sure the cloth was stolen from someone; I do not care who."

She held out the folded yukata and belt with both hands. She trembled but she did not submit, and the ghost finally reached out and took them from her as if there were no difference between her corporeal state and his own.

"Once he reaches the other side of the River of Three Crossings, his clothing will be taken from him. You know that," Kenji said. "Including the comb."

She scowled. "His clothes will be taken and weighed to judge his sins by the presumptious demons who await him there. I do know a little about what is to come beyond the Sanzu. Yet it is not important that he keeps the clothes, Sir Priest. Only that he has them to lose. As it was, that Minamoto baka provided an executioner but no clothing and no funeral. I need the cloth to make my father's new clothes so I can keep my promise. As for the comb or anything else that belongs to my father, I pity the demon who tries to take that from him."

I frowned. "That's all he awaits? The comb and the clothes?"

"More than enough. Those are the two chains holding my father to this life, Sir. Unless you help me break them, neither of us will get what we want. Will you help me?"

"Yes. How long do you need?"

"Three days. She taught me a great deal, but I'm not the seamstress my mother was."

"Three days," I said. "No more."

I gave the deadline not to be abrupt, or impatient. I just didn't believe that Hideki would wait much longer than three days. We escorted Momiji from the confines of Byodoin Temple back to the village. We made sure she was fed but otherwise did nothing but take her back to her simple hut and leave her there. Kenji glanced backward as we returned to our own quarters.

"Are you sure this is wise? Perhaps you should have held onto the comb while she works on the clothing or at least ask Hideki to put a guard on her."

I grunted. "Unless I am badly mistaken, the comb is useless to her without the clothes. Besides, I don't want any steel under Hideki's command anywhere near that girl. We'll know soon enough if she's telling the truth."

"And you really think she is?"

"Yes," I said. "I just don't think she's telling all of it."

We got some confirmation of this when, on the evening of the second day, Momiji slipped out of her hut through an opening in the back. She did not make for the bridge, for there was a watchman there, but headed toward a shallow part of the river where she waded across, her bundle held high over her head.

"This is what comes of trusting such a one," Kenji said.

I kept my voice low. "Spare us both your wounded sensibilities. If we had trusted her, we wouldn't have kept watch. Now let's follow—quietly—though I think we can guess where she is going."

Right to the clearing where we had found her in the first place. She used flint to get a small fire going and then burned incense as before. Or rather she burned some fragrant dried flower buds, as proper incense was beyond her means. It did not take long for Takeshi to arrive. The blue flame resolved itself into the fiercely grimacing bandit.

COMB, he said.

"The yukata first, Father."

COMB! he demanded.

"No! Keep your promise to me."

His promise to her? That was something she had not mentioned, and I didn't like the way this was going. I stood up and now the ghost was glaring at me. So was Momiji, but she shook her head and held up her hand, and the meaning was clear: Wait!

I waited, though every instinct I had told me to stop this now and find some other way. Only there was no other way.

"They don't matter, Father. You don't know them. You deal with me."

The ghost looked back at his daughter. If it was possible for a person to kneel before another in complete defiance, I could say that I had seen such a thing as Momiji kneeled before the ghost of her father. She held out the folded yukata and belt with both hands. She trembled but she did not submit, and the ghost finally reached out and took them from her as if there was no difference between her corporeal state and his own. In an instant the ghost went from a roughly dressed bandit to a finely dressed bandit. In my opinion it was too much like dressing an ogre for court, but I had to admit that Momiji had done a very good job with what she had been given.

COMB, repeated the ghost, more calmly this time.

"Very well, but remember your promises. Both of them."

She held up the comb on her outstretched hands, palms facing upward, and he took the comb from her and appeared to tuck it away in his sash. The moments passed, and then some more, but nothing happened. We could see the anger and frustration building in the ghost. I had said that Tadeshi was no longer dangerous, but that was never entirely true of any spirit, and especially an angry one. But why was he angry? What was wrong?

"He still cannot pass," Kenji said.

Momiji bowed low and then retreated to sprint over to where I and now Kenji stood in plain sight.

"I gather you wished him to leave without witnesses?"

She blushed, but did not look away. "I don't know what's wrong!"

"I think I do," Kenji said. "I'll have to help him."

"If you try to exorcise, him he'll just flee!" Momiji said, but Kenji had already begun his chant.

Tadeshi did not move.

It took me several long moments to understand why. "Kenji is not chanting a rite of exorcism," I said. "He's giving your father his funeral."

Momiji's eyes widened, and she ran back to kneel in front of her father. By tradition, the dead could not pass over the River of Three Crossings before seven days from the time of death and were not considered truly and finally dead until then. Tadeshi's seven days were long past. Behind him, the bamboo grove began to shimmer and ripple, like a reflection in water. When the image cleared there was no bamboo at all, only a vast emptiness crossed by a river of black water. Beyond that was a jagged mountain peak with no snow, no trees.

Mount Fear.

I knew I was looking at the Sanzu, the River of Three Crossings. Kenji's chant had opened the portal between our world and the next. Tadeshi the Red turned his back to us and strode purposefully toward the river. What happened next occurred so fast that I didn't fully realize what had happened for nearly two heartbeats: Momiji took two long steps and leaped, landing on her father's back, threw her arms around his neck, and held on. Tadeshi didn't even pause or look back. Neither did Momiji as they headed for a place where the river nearly boiled with serpents.

Perhaps I could have moved faster. Perhaps, if I had not seen the look in Momiji's eyes as she turned back toward me just before their plunge into the river. As it happened, I wasn't even halfway across the clearing when the portal closed, and the river bank was a bamboo grove once again. Kenji's droning chant faded away, but all I could do was stare at the place where Momiji and her father had disappeared.

"She mentioned two promises," Kenji said quietly. "Do you think that was the second one?"

"I think he promised not to leave her alone," I said. "That's why she wouldn't give him the comb first. He could have chosen to refuse the clothes, and so his promise to her would not have been binding. Perhaps that was love. A desire to spare her. Or a wish to avoid inconvenience. I really don't know which."

"A man of his word," Kenji said.

So was Hideki, of course. He not only paid the agreed fee with no argument but loaned us an oxcart to carry it back to Kyoto. "Keeping your word is not the only virtue a man might possess," Kenji said as we began the journey back to the Capital. "But it is a virtue."

"I suppose," I said.

"So. What will you with your wealth?"

"Pay off debts. Drink. A lot."

"I know what you are thinking, Lord Yamada, and to an extent I agree, but, seriously, what could you have done? Taken Momiji as a servant? You can't even support yourself most of the time. That girl was beyond help, at least in this life."

"Momiji apparently agreed. But actually, I was thinking that Prince Kanemore owes me a favor. And Princess Ai is in need of a new attendant."

Kenji scowled. "Princess Ai? The most ill-tempered woman ever to marry an Emperor? That would have been no kindness to the poor girl."

I didn't answer. Kenji looked thoughtful. "Do you think they made it?"

"Across the river?" I barely had to recall the look in Momiji's eyes before I replied, "I have no doubt of it."

"I'm not so certain. The veil between worlds was very thin there because of the ghost. That's the first time I've seen the River of Three Crossings. Those serpents were terrible."

"Numerous, certainly," I said, "but as with Princess Ai, I think your concern is misplaced. The ones I'd worry about are the snakes." ❧

Behind him, the bamboo grove began to shimmer and ripple, like a reflection in water. When the image cleared there was no bamboo at all, only a vast emptiness crossed by a river of black water.

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It can't be granted. It's a terrible wish. Unless it isn't. If she's willing to make that wish, if I have the power to grant it, who am I to deny it?

I haven't been to an audition in months. Audrey's stopped asking if I want to go to dinner. Barry, who sometimes plays Prince Charming opposite me, has stopped asking me what's wrong after I tell him nothing a dozen times. His smile turns fake, and he stops talking to me at all. I only notice as a vague observation.

I only ever feel real when I'm Cinderella. But I still can't touch the tiara on my apartment floor. I wait for the letter telling me Abby has died. It doesn't come.

I wish ...

And I realize how long it's been since I've even done that. I used to have lots of wishes. But I never see myself in the tiara.

For the first time in ages, I sneak into the park after closing and go to the wishing well.

Leaning on the stone wall, my chin bends almost to my chest, and my shoulders slump with the weight of the world.

"I don't know what to do," I whisper, but even then my voice echoes. The stone carries it down to the thin layer of water pooling on the concrete at the bottom. The nights are getting cooler. I shiver. I should bring my coat, if I'm going to come out here. I should go back, go home. But what's the point? I'd see that thing on my floor. I don't want to see it ever again.

What else do I have? I take stock: what else can I ever do in this world that would measure up to what I've accomplished waving my magic wand, making wishes come true?

"What's wrong?"

I look behind me, assuming someone has snuck up, emerging from shadows. Security, maybe. If I get caught, I'll be fired. But no one's there.

"I'm right here."

The voice comes from the well. Androgynous, a soft contralto, echoing then dissipating. If I hadn't been sitting right in this spot, I might not have heard it at all.

"Oh my God," I murmur.

The wishing well chuckles. "Don't sound so shocked."

"But—" I close my eyes, shake my head. The well. Talking to me. That's it, I'm crazy.

"I know who you are. What you've been doing. You aren't really surprised at all."

It's right, of course. "If you know all that, then you know what's wrong."

"Yes," it says. It might even sound a little sad.

I lean forward. "You know where it came from, don't you? You know who gave it to me."

"Yes."

"I want to give it back. I have to give it back, find whoever gave it to me, wherever it came from, and give it back." I grip the wall, urgency firing my nerves. I can solve the mystery. I can be free. "Tell me where that thing came from."

It remains silent for so long, I start to think I've imagined it. The well doesn't speak, it's my own addled mind.

Then it says, "It came from me."

I stare into the shadowed space. "You?"

"It's the same magic, after all. Granting wishes."

"Then I'll bring it back, I'll throw it in—"

"Don't do that."

"Why not?"

"It came from me, but it can't come back. I didn't give it to you."

"Then who did?" My voice is taut, nearly hysterical.

"The girl who left it in your locker."

It speaks in riddles. Of course it does. "I don't understand."

"The tiara came from me, but it's been handed down ever since, for more than fifty years now. From girl to girl to girl. From Cinderellas to Snow Whites to Sleeping Beauties and back again."

"But why? Why did it come to me? There's a dozen other girls who play Cinderella."

"But you believe."

I come to the wishing well. Been doing it all along. I'm marked.

"Then ... then I have to pass it along, if I don't want it anymore."

However enigmatic the well is, it seems kind. A voice whispering through a cave on a breeze. "Yes. The wishes aren't free, Maddie. Each one takes a little bit of you with it. You were never meant to sacrifice yourself for so long. I can even tell you who comes here to make wishes, who you can give it to next. Then you can replenish what you've given away."

"How?"

"You have to remember your own dreams."

So. Time to write a note, tie it to the tiara, and hide it in a locker. Find the person who believes like I do, who sneaks into the park at night to make wishes at the well. Pass the burden on to her. And when she puts the tiara on her head, will she see Abby's aunt praying by the hospital bed, wishing away her own life? Will the next girl grant that wish?

"What's your dream, Maddie?" the well breathes. A chill air rises from it.

I stare vacantly at the stones on the wall, concrete painted with fake lichens. "I don't remember."

"It's not so hard to give the power up," it says, sounding frustrated now. "Sara, who plays Snow White in the parades. Choose her."

And while I wait, frozen, unable to decide, maybe Abby will die, taking the decision out of my hands. Then we, those of us still living, can all be miserable.

"It's very cruel," I say, "to grant someone power, then make sure it kills them."

"But that's the way of fairy tales."

I push myself away from the wall. Travel the cobbled path around the castle, run from the sound of rustling leaves, and flee the park.

Can the princess who wears the tiara ever see herself?

I stand in front of my bathroom mirror and put it on.

The scene has changed, but only a little. Abby looks worse, if that's possible. Her skin has a yellow cast to it, as if internal organs are in the process of failing. More tubes, more wires, more drip bags are attached to her. Her aunt Christine sits back in her chair, hugging a thick cardigan around her. Abby's mother leans on the bedside, clinging to the girl's hand.

The wish is still out there. I see it there, in the mirror in front of me. Mirror, mirror on the wall ...

I touch the tiara, preparing to take it off again, knowing the well is right. This isn't my decision to make. The tiara has spoken. But I don't have to be the one to see it happen. Let Sara do that.

But I don't take it off. Blinking, I can bring myself into focus. I study the image: a twenty-one-year-old college dropout with shadowed eyes and gaunt cheeks. I look like one of those girls who starves herself to be thin enough for Hollywood auditions. I haven't realized I haven't been eating. Short hair, bleached blond. Pale skin. A crown on my head, its gemstone sparkling. A princess in the midst of her worst challenge, before the happily ever after finds her.

But I can't see that road before me anymore. I can't see how my story ends. I only know three things, the fairy tale three: I don't want Abby to die. I don't want Christine to die. This power I wear on my head has to be good for something.

I close my eyes and see the hospital room. I hear Christine, wishing in her mind, *Take me instead.*

Granting a wish takes a piece of me, that was what the wishing well said. What do I have to give to grant a wish that saves a life? I look in the mirror again, see myself in the room, and think, with all the power of my life, *No, take me.*

Abby opens her eyes, and her gaze meets mine, sees me, just before I fall, and the world spins away. ❧

Yorkshire, 1937

Unerring, uncanny, and silent, Vervain guided her between the slag heaps and across the web of interlocking railway lines, past rows of coal wagons squat and unmoving in the half-light like black centipedes frozen in the act of crawling from their burrows. Through the wasteland they walked, Vervain fastidiously skirting the oil-streaked puddles while Rosalind clomped through the ash and muck and hazard without regard for her boots. With the confidence of true Cunning, she knew she'd endure far worse before this day was done.

The trail wove between untidy piles of scrap iron and timber toward three long brick buildings fouled by decades of smoke. High atop the biggest building Rosalind saw a pair of wheelheads like giant bicycle wheels mounted onto a tubular gantry, linked by steel hawsers.

The air was ripe with the black smeech of coal dust. It did not take a seer to know the terrible filth that must accumulate in the chests and pores and eyes of the miners who worked here every week of their lives, or to predict their wretched early deaths.

"Near dawn," murmured Rosalind. "We passed the night boys comin' home an hour since." Grimy shadows they'd been, the explosives crew; creeping out whey-faced and exhausted, still reeking of blasting powder. "Day shift must be on seam by now. Why still so quiet?"

"It's an old mine," said Vervain. "Extensive. Once down under they still have to hike to the coalface. Could be miles. It's not like they just drop in and start whacking away with their pickaxes."

Fossil Fuels

BY ALAN SMALE
ILLUSTRATION
BY CHRIS COCOZZA

Those who do not study history are doomed to repeat it.
So, perhaps, are those who study it too closely.

Earlier they'd trudged through the village that supplied the miners for this pit, past dirty terraced cottages shored up with wooden buttresses against underground subsidence; walls cracked, chimneys aslant, the overcrowded shanties of the perennially poor. Even at that early hour slum girls with filthy hair had peered at them out of back kitchens, bright-eyed with suspicion. Rosalind had wanted nothing more than to scoop up those girls, carry them a hundred miles away, and fling them into a mountain stream. Now, here at the pithead, she craved that cleansing stream for herself.

The dawn chilled the landscape, rather than warming it. "Let's get this over with," she said.

As if this was a signal, the colliery awoke. With a creak the giant wheels overhead started to turn, cranking up the first loads of coal from the mine tunnels far below. A tall chimney began to spit smoke. Trucks snaked out of the siding, the steam engine snorting as the brakeman blinked owlishly. Above their heads tubs of slag hung on steel cables, their journey to the heaps arrested by the last end-of-shift; now they, too, reluctantly dragged across the sky toward their final resting place.

Looking further, Rosalind saw people crawling over the slagheaps like lice. Rickety thin men and dumpy women in shawls, kneeling against the wind to pick out tiny chips of coal from the slag to put into their sacks, too poor to buy the fuel their fellow villagers carved out of the depths. Braving acrid smoke, as many of the heaps smoldered with the slow fire that burned deep within them.

The bleakness of such lives tugged at Rosalind's heart. Not long since, these broken souls might have danced the maypole.

Vervain frowned at her, said "Enough, now!" with some scorn, and led her through the iron doors into the pithead.

Clegg the foreman wore rough worsted trousers and a patched donkey jacket, collar pulled up against the early-morning chill. These two dodgy characters had put him into a tight spot, and he stood firm against them. "Bad luck for a woman to go down t'pit," he said stolidly. "Worst luck there is."

He spat, and as Rosalind involuntarily watched the gob fly to the floor at his feet she saw the flecks of coal dust in his spittle.

"E'en worse luck if she don't," said Vervain, lapsing into the vernacular. "Specially for you. You've an intruder in your mine already, Mr. Clegg. A bad man. This 'un here'll find him and bring him out, solve your problem right quick."

"I got no problem," said Clegg, and "Aye, you do," replied the slight figure of Vervain with a voice as cold as steel.

"The lads wouldn't like it," said Clegg.

"Then don't tell 'em," said Vervain. "We'll send her down the secondary shaft and she can avoid the main haulage roads. That way she'll not be seen by many." He paused. "We'll not argue about this, will we? 'Cause there's nowt that'll stop us."

"That right?" said Clegg, squaring up.

"Happen so," said Vervain.

Rosalind eyed them. Clegg was bigger and probably fancied himself in a scrap, but he didn't know that Vervain could move swift as greased pig-shit, and had a fist like wood.

"Funny, that," she said, speaking for the first time. "About the women. Used to be that women worked down below all the time. Harnessed to wagons, haulin' tubs of coal up through tunnels on their hands and knees."

"Not for nigh on a hundred year," said the foreman in disgust. To Vervain he said, "You might go, in a pinch. But not the woman."

Vervain took a helmet off a wall peg and plonked it unceremoniously onto Rosalind's head. All femininity disappeared once her hair was hidden; for all the beauty of her name, Rosalind Theaker was a woman of shocking plainness.

"What woman is that, then?" said Vervain. "Bit o' coal dust on her cheeks, she'll easily pass for a boy. Which reminds me, we'll need one, a boy I mean, for a guide down below. Wouldn't want our chap 'ere getting himself lost, eh?"

Clegg didn't even spare her a glance. "She in't going. End of story."

"She's a Cunning Woman," said Vervain.

"I'm sure she—" Clegg shut up abruptly and turned to stare at Rosalind.

"I know," said Vervain apologetically. "She don't look so very cunning."

"Oh, ha ha," said Rosalind.

Clegg examined her more carefully. Tall for a woman, strong-featured, block-jawed, a nose you could quarry coal with, but no trace of anything untoward. Then, as if she were coming into focus right before his eyes, he suddenly felt her deep solidity. She and Vervain looked not at all similar, but a vein of something old and tough threaded them both.

Startled, Clegg took an involuntary step back and Rosalind, her teeth showing again in what he now realized was a smile, picked up a safety lamp and marched off past him toward the cage.

"Best dirty her up," said Clegg. "Face is so bright about now, she won't be needing that lamp."

"Cunning Woman, eh?" said Clegg quietly, as he clipped the battery pack to Rosalind's waist and plugged the rubber-coated twin-core cable into her helmet. He pushed at the slider and a pale circle of light shone from the bulb on its brim; satisfied, he turned it off to save power.

"Aye," said Rosalind, fiddling with the helmet straps.

"E'en more reason why you don't have to do whatever that nancy-boy tells you."

Now the matter was decided Vervain had lost interest and was wandering around the pithead poking his nose into things and humming. "Not doing it for him," said Rosalind.

"One of my aunts," said Clegg. "Cunning and creepy, both. She'd look at a man and tell him all about himself, right to his face. Stuff she couldn't have known otherwise. And she did herbs, remedies. Going around for dinner you always had to wonder what you were eating."

She grinned tautly. "I don't do that. But I know the type."

Clegg took the lamp from her, pressed the igniter until it lit, and handed it back. It was a tall old-looking thing of battered metal with a flame sheltered in glass and gauze. She felt her hand begin to shake as she took it. "Safety lamp," he said. "Watch the flame. Any change from the color you see now means the air is bad. If it burns brighter and blue then there's firedamp about, which is inflammable gas, methane or such. If you're not sure, turn the lamp down and the flame'll appear to have a little cap over it. That's the firedamp burning off. Light starts to flicker and fade by itself, that's carbon dioxide. Too much o' that builds up and you can't breathe anymore. Got that?"

Rosalind grimaced.

"Either way, don't dally down there. This 'un you're hunting, he's Cunning too?"

"Of course."

"And what's this really all about?"

"Long story." Rosalind paused, then bent down and pulled the knife partway out of her boot. Their eyes met.

He whistled softly. "Like that, eh? Come on."

The cage was a box of bashed iron panels and mesh held together with rivets, barely narrower than the shaft that opened up beneath it. Above it stretched the steel hawser; the headgear in the roof linked it to a winding engine in the adjacent building. It swayed as Rosalind stepped in.

"Your boy'll be waiting at the bottom," said Clegg.

"All right."

The cage door rattled and slammed, closing her in.

"Best of British luck to ye," said Clegg, and pulled the lever to send her down.

The lurch and drop of the cage shattered Rosalind's air of calm confidence. She grabbed at the metal walls and hung on, white-knuckled. Falling through the inky black, the speed of the cage's

descent inspired a breeze upward through the mesh that reeked of coal and grease, cast-iron and rust.

The darkness pierced her like a dagger in her gut. She tasted fear and scrabbled to turn on the helmet-lamp, but couldn't find the slider. Then her eyes adjusted to the lantern's cool flame.

Several pounding heartbeats later the shaft opened out, now illuminated by the wan flicker of electricity. As the cage clanked to a halt, the onsetter pulled open the door and Rosalind almost fell forward into the mine. He glanced at her incuriously and pulled a small wagon of coal into the cage to replace her before cranking the lever to send it back up.

Rosalind found herself in a hollowed-out area the size and shape of a small church, with the shaft marking the steeple. Instead of pews she saw wagons and toolboxes, ropes, disused lanterns, picks, and crates. Shadows danced across the stone walls. She was a quarter mile underground.

This was the secondary shaft, of course; the shaft less traveled, the backup for use in emergencies. The pit bank at the foot of the main shaft would be alive with wagons and miners and sustained, frantic activity. But Rosalind was supposed to be evading notice.

Her boy was waiting, summoned by Morse code—Clegg had tapped on a telegraph while Vervain was smearing muck on her face. The boy carried a safety lamp but no helmet. Unsettled from her plummet into the earth she peered at him askance and accidentally saw the hour and nature of his death. Damn it.

"'S alright," said the boy cockily, misinterpreting her shudder. "The cage cain't help but sway and creak. Safe as 'ouses, it is."

Another ominous portent to Rosalind, who'd been killed more regularly in her own homesteads than anywhere else. She pulled herself together and walked the boy away from the onsetter. "What's your name?"

"Peter."

Dirty ears, no cap, short hair cut badly; a scrappy comma of a boy, not yet robust enough to haul a wagon or pickaxe a seam, Peter managed to achieve a certain gangly awkwardness without actually being tall.

Peter: the rock. The rock was to be her ally. Though this one was barely more than a stone. And, like that other Peter, he'd deny her three times before this was over. But he'd do his best, there at the end.

She watched him sum her up in return, with the instinctual distaste of the young and supple for the old and overstretched. Irked, she said, "Are boys supposed to come down the mine?"

"Are women?" he replied, and then, hastily, "I'm older than I look."

So much for concealing her gender. Fortunately, the boy seemed unfazed that she was female. "'Course you are. I'm Rosalind Theaker."

"A Cunning Woman?"

She tutted, exasperated. "Clegg needs to keep his trap shut."

"Weren't Clegg what told me. It's plain to see." Peter squinted at her. "And I'm to help you look for someone sneaked down 'ere, who in't a miner?"

Rosalind had to trust Peter at least partway or he'd be no help to her. "Aye. A bad man. A ruffian and a scamp, makes all kinds of mischief. Known as Jack-the-Lad." Or Jack-in-the-Green, or Jumping Jack, Jolly Jack, or Puck, Robin.... She bit her lip. If she must speak truth to this whelp, let her speak as little of it as possible.

"Jack-the-Lad?" said Peter. "You're hunting a boy?"

"I never said he were young. It's just his name."

"You're mad as a bloomin' hare," said Peter, and turned to lead the way further into the mine.

The tunnel was eight feet wide and five feet high, with rough-hewn walls slabbed with shale. Above them hung four hundred vertical yards of solid rock and soil, held at bay by the mercy of God and an array of wooden props barely as thick as Rosalind's arm. The air had a dusty, fiery odor.

She'd been expecting something like a cave. Rosalind understood caves, but this was not one. It was a travesty, a mutilation; the land disemboweled.

Every twenty yards there was a side tunnel draped with sacking. "They drive the tunnels in pairs," Peter explained. "These headings lead through to t'other of the pair. We're going down the air-in, and that over there's the air-out." The breeze was indeed pushing gently on the backs of their necks.

"The sacking stops the air from taking a short cut. And if one tunnel collapses, t'other provides an escape," Rosalind ventured, and was rewarded with a nod.

"These here ain't main haulage roads, though. You may see 'un later, out beyond, where they raise out the coal."

"Right you are."

"What Cunning are you?" he said suddenly. "What kind?"

Right now, Rosalind didn't feel any kind of Cunning. She felt small and unhappy, dwarfed by Vervain, daunted by Jack-the-Lad, and diminished by the task of seeking him out down here in the bowels of the earth.

"What kind?" the boy persisted, and before she knew it she'd had to answer: "I can see in both directions."

"Eh?" With an exaggerated movement Peter turned his head left and then right. "If I can see both directions, am I Cunning too, then?"

"Nay, just sharp enough to cut yourself. It's other directions I'm talkin' of. Past and future."

"Oh," said Peter. "Oh, those, aye, yeah."

They tromped on in silence, lit only by the anemic pallor of their helmet lights and the yellow flare of the safety lamps. Rosalind had to constantly duck to pass under the wooden beams or get clouted on the head. She couldn't hear any clamor of mine-working yet; they must have a long way to go. Her breathing quickened and she made an effort to calm it.

"So you're sayin' you can see the future?"

"Aye."

"Fortune-teller, then? Palms and tea leaves?"

"Not like that. It's something I can just ... do. If I put my mind to it."

"So what's that like, then?"

Rosalind was tiring of the conversation. "Dunno. What's it like to be you?"

"Dull," said the boy. "Down here six days a week, fetch-and-carry, leadin' folks around.... But you always know what's going to happen next, you say?"

"Aye. Mostly."

Peter thought about it. "That might make it e'en more boring yet," he said.

"It well might," said she.

The tunnel floor tilted downward. Their lights reached no more

She'd seen and lived through horrors, but much worse was on the way in just a few short years. War across Europe, fire-bombing of cities, genocide ... Unthinkable things that nobody knew of yet but her.

than twenty feet ahead. "Is it much farther?"

"Don't you already know?" he said quickly.

Rosalind sighed. "Right funny. You were waitin' to say that, weren't you?"

"Or summat like. We're not yet a third of the way. Quarter, maybe." He paused. "So what have you predicted?"

Again she suffered the unstoppable spilling of the truth. "French Revolution, Great Fire. Steamships of metal. Them usin' gas to kill boys like you in the Great War." She stopped, eyes hot and bleak, biting her lip. She'd seen and lived through horrors, but much worse was on the way in just a few short years. War across Europe, firebombing of cities, genocide.... Unthinkable things that nobody knew of yet but her. She hoped no one would ask.

"French what?" said Peter.

"Just a big mess. Riots and such. They killed a king. A long while back."

They came to a wide haulage road carved out to twice the size and width of the tunnels they'd been walking, lined with cables, lit by electricity, awash with noise and wagons on a narrow-gauge track. None of the men paid Rosalind and Peter the slightest attention as they crossed it and stepped into the continuation of their tunnel on the opposite side.

"Cain't go direct," said Peter. "Be shorter, o' course, but we'd get in the way of the tubs and the men and have to keep stoppin'. And someone might twig that you're, well, not a man, and make a fuss. So this is better."

Rosalind's back ached from the persistent stooping. "Wait." She leaned back out into the road and uncricked her neck and inhaled heavily, aware of the steady breeze from the pumping of the air. She'd seen enough now to visualize the mine as a maze of tunnels spreading out from the twin shafts, with the haulage roads as the arteries and tunnels as the veins, each ending at a coalface. In places she'd already seen black slivers in the walls; remnants of a seam.

For here was the coal:
buried tropical forests of the
Paleozoic, ancient glades
from before the time of men,
compressed and fused
and now at the mercy of the
human gnomes who gave
the best of themselves ....

Rosalind had expected her foreboding to diminish once she escaped the cage. Yet her inner terror was increasing. She was used to the expansiveness of natural caverns, the play of firelight on quartz, the sparkle of underground lakes, water over limestone. Galleries and stalactites. This mine was a strange thing by contrast: man-made and functional, swiss-cheesed. The weight of the rock above seemed to press directly onto Rosalind's brain. The glare of the electric lights made her flinch. Yet, ahead of them in the smaller tunnel, the darkness threatened her even more.

Scared of the light, and scared of the dark, Rosalind thought. Peculiar.

"How old are you?" said Peter.

"Thirty-seven," she said, "born in 1900, with the century," though today she felt as old as the earth.

She took a deep breath and ducked into the tunnel. They went on.

As she followed the boy's skinny back, Rosalind turned her head askance again. Once more the future leapt into her direct view: images of an England where the importance of coal was diminished and pits were being forcibly closed by a cold, merciless government. National strikes in response, with the rule of law enforced by police armed with batons and shields, men with a job to do, disinclined to mercy, hiding behind their uniforms, often battling their own kin.

And there in her vision stood Peter among the miners. A Peter much older and a little wiser, bull-headed, defying the police for the sake of his family and his livelihood. Rosalind watched the charge and the savage scuffle that ensued, ending with the baton-blow that cleaved his skull. Peter fell in a violent, futile death, fighting strong men backed by powers he could never defeat.

Stupid. Pathetic. Rosalind shivered in the dark.

Rosalind couldn't imagine how the miners could walk so far each day, before they even started their work.

Now she was beginning to hear the heavy, aggressive whine of drilling machines. The boom and shiver of the rock were increasing slowly. They were heading for the inferno by inches.

Peter dropped back alongside her. "So. There's this Jack. And against him, there's me and you. And I'm small and you're a woman."

She nodded.

"And him, he's a big man?"

"Don't know. Long time since we met. It's complicated."

"So you don't know how he looks now?"

"... Nay."

"You won't recognize 'un?"

"Oh, I'll know him for who he is."

"And him a real bad 'un?"

"Wicked. Treacherous. Evil."

Peter kicked at a stone and sent it ricocheting off the wall. "It don't make sense, mam, just you and me, up against him?"

Peter's death still shimmered in Rosalind's peripheral vision, its resonance unsettling. Aye, whyever set yourself up against a stronger foe? "It's not the same."

"What?"

"I'll win. How this ends in't in doubt."

"Not to you, maybe," he muttered.

The coalface waited ahead, black as doom.

Rosalind's ears rang with the outrageous cacophony. She gulped down coal dust with every breath. The boy looked up, seeking her reaction, but it took time for Rosalind to make sense of what she saw, and once she did, her emotions ran too deeply to show on her face.

This, then, was the coalface; this, then, was Hell.

The shiny coal lay woven through the rock in thin seams. The seam the men were working now was four feet in height, banded above and below by ash-colored rock. The miners' task was to remove the filling from a rock sandwich, the roof above them shored up only by temporary wooden props and by the intrinsic tension of the rock itself.

Through a haze of coal and smoke, Rosalind saw hard, darkened men ropy with muscle lined up along the seam. Kneeling stripped to the waist, clad in only britches and boots, they shoveled coal over their shoulders onto the clattering conveyor belt a yard behind them with the inhuman speed of the possessed. Ahead of the line of shovelers a metal machine the size of a coffin hauled itself along the rock face, guided by a steel hawser and powered by a compressed-air turbine. Solid teeth many inches long bit deep into the coal, hacking free large chunks of the sleek black rock.

Among and between, other men leaned into the cramped gallery to thump at the coal with picks and iron bars to bring it down and break it up, conspiring with the machine and their fellow men to carve a deep horizontal groove into the rock.

The roar from the conveyor belt fought with the screech of the metal digging machine that ripped it down from the gallery. The fog of the coal dust scattered the light from their electric torches and safety lamps back into their eyes. Rosalind blinked convulsively, and swallowed and cleared her throat at the same time.

This was vital work. A newcomer to the industrial world, Rosalind nonetheless knew that coal was the lifeblood of England, and would remain so even after men learned how to unleash massive power from corrupt matter in its tiniest form a few years hence. But, at such a price.... How were these men not deaf in a day, maimed in a week, blind in a month?

Rosalind tried not to look askance, but grim images still leaked back to her from their arid futures. Human life spans would set to lengthen almost unbelievably in the coming years ... but not for these men.

The heartbreak threatened to overwhelm her. But it would shame her to show weakness in front of Peter. She sought out the ancient strength at her core, and took power from it.

The boy looked from Rosalind to the miners and back again. His lips framed the words: Well? D'you see him? Is Jack here?

Aye, Rosalind saw Jack, and felt him all around her in the chaos that enclosed them and the reek of tortured metal. Jack's spore lined the walls and hung in the foul air. His essence was pervasive. The Jack-in-the-Green had stood here, not long since.

"We're right on his tail," she said calmly, unable to hear her own words.

For here was the coal: buried tropical forests from the Paleozoic, ancient glades from before the time of men, compressed and fused and now at the mercy of the human gnomes who gave the best of themselves to rip it from the bowels of the earth.

Jack had needed to see this. He had been compelled to witness the long-dead fossil trees being brutally harvested from the rock walls of this place. And, for his own mad motives, he'd wanted Rosalind to experience it too.

She tugged Peter back around a corner and through a heading until they were far enough from the infernal racket that she could be heard.

"We're at the wrong end," she said.

"What?"

"This here's the future," she said. "Here, where we're standing? This is me, Rosalind, my direction. The wrong direction. Jack was here, but he's gone now. And to catch up with 'un we'll have to head t'other way, Jack's way. Off into the past."

Peter rebelled, of course, denied her for the first time with his I'll not go and It's too dangerous and You can't make me, but Rosalind had sharp words with him and now he led the way once more, though still muttering and sulky.

He took her a few hundred yards down the long haulage road, swerving around the coal tubs and the cursing men and coming perilously close to the sharp banded edges of a conveyor belt, then diagonally through to another identical tunnel. The din of the coal-face faded, though if Rosalind placed her hand against the rock wall she could still feel the vibrations.

Now, an hour on, they hiked through darker tunnels where the coal had been carved out by pickax and sweat, unassisted by the percussive coal-cutters and compressed air turbines of the current age. Here, decaying wooden frameworks buckled under the strain. Old limestone dust crunched underfoot on the roadways, laid out to inhibit coal-dust explosions. Shale and trash lined the pathway. Rosalind saw empty food packets and tins that looked early Victorian. They were now deep into a pillaged wasteland long since abandoned by the grandfathers of today's miners; the gaping wounds between the rock layers were all that remained.

Rosalind was not tall, but these older tunnels made her walk with even more of a stoop, swinging her arms to keep her forward momentum. She could stand upright only in the areas where the roof had already fallen in, allowing her a modicum of physical relief but no reassurance. Several times they had to sidestep boulders of many tons that blocked their way; twice they even had to retrace their steps and cross to the parallel tunnel due to massive collapse that they could not pass.

"Shouldn't be goin' this way," said Peter. "Look at all this crap. Look at the supports. They're knackered. In't safe."

"What's right often in't what's easy or nice. Come with me or I'll tell Clegg you left me to go alone." Rosalind kept walking.

"Mam?"

"Don't call me that."

"You've to be thinkin' of the air, too. Away from the ventilated areas, there's bad air. There's firedamp, and that's explosive, mostly, um—"

"Methane," she said, recalling Clegg.

"Aye. And whitedamp, which is poisonous but won't burn, and blackdamp, which is poisonous too. And you cain't smell 'un. The only one you can smell is stinkdamp, and that's rotten eggs. The others will put you under right quick but you'll not even know they're there."

"And that's why we're carrying safety lamps," said Rosalind impatiently.

"Aye, but once we're in it we might not have the breath to get out. Just keel over and die."

"That in't what happens today. I keep tellin' you."

"Well, then, mam, what does happen?"

Short of breath and temper, Rosalind raised her hand to cuff the boy, then dropped it to her side again.

"Damn, Peter," she said.

One of the crosses Rosalind bore was her inability to lie. Besides, if she was asking this randomly chosen boy to walk into danger with her, he deserved to know why.

"What happens today," she said, "is that I win and we live."

"And you know how?"

"Not exactly, doesn't matter."

"But how can that be?" said Peter obstinately, though it was hard for him to be resolute while hopping sideways, the only way he could confront her while she strode on at such a pace. "Mam, how? All this talk, this Cunning, how does it work?"

"You already think I'm nutty as a, what, rabbit?"

"Shouldn't I?"

"How well do you remember last week?" she snapped.

"Nothin' happened last week!"

"Really? Well then, I see next week about as clearly as you remember last week. Next month, as well as last month. It's glimmers through shadow, Peter. When you search your memory, d'you see every last detail? Can you even recall exactly what you saw fifteen minutes back? 'Course not. Well, that's how it is with me."

Relenting, Rosalind lowered her voice. "It in't set out plain, like a map. I can see images if I choose. I just have to twist my head in a certain way, a way you can't see, because I'm lookin' in a direction you can't turn toward. But I have to know what I'm lookin' for. It's like you, needing to know what questions to ask before you can get a sensible answer."

"Well, aye," said Peter fervently. "I understand that right enough."

Rosalind counted to ten. "You'll just have to trust me. As it is I've told you more than I've told any other living soul."

"Only says you're tight with words." Peter sucked down a breath and glanced again at the lamp's robust flame for reassurance. "Look, mam, I just want to know what's really going on. I don't even mean the future. Just the now. Jack-the-flippin'-Lad? What's he runnin' from? What's he afraid of?"

"Jack? Nowt. Certainly not the likes of me."

"Then he lured you down here to fight wi' him?"

"Worse than that," she said. "He wants to talk to me."

"What?"

"Talk, Peter. If anyone knows about talk, it's you."

"And you couldn't have had yer talk up-top?"

"Happen not."

"But you don't want to talk to him."

Rosalind shrugged. "We can talk. But I'm still goin' to kill 'un."

Peter gaped. "Kill?"

Aye, that was the first time she'd said as much in the boy's company, damn it. Rosalind strode on. "Yes. Kill."

"Holy Christ!"

"Don't be sayin' words like that."

He scurried after her. "Why? Why's this man so important?"

"Why, why?" she mimicked. "Lots of reasons. Because he's just evil, and wrong, and ... sly. And, beyond that ... because he killed a friend of mine. Someone I'd known for ... ever such a long time." Peter had inadvertently asked her just the wrong question, and now the words tumbled out of her. "Her name was usually Sally. Often the three of us'd be together, different as chalk and cheese, but still able to laugh around a fire or live round the same village green. And for all our differences, we were still more similar to each other than to—" She looked at Peter, and fell silent.

"How did Sally die?" he prompted. "How long ago?"

"After Shakespeare," said Rosalind. "Before Swift." Peter looked blank, and she went on. "How did he kill her? I don't even know, and I'd rather not. Even longer ago, we were four. Seth is long gone, and that's nobody's fault. But Jack killed Sally dead, right enough. Worse than killed. Snuffed her like a flame. Made her extinct. And I'd known her for so very long."

"Gosh."

Rosalind went on, relentless in her explication of the inexplicable. "This'll be hard for you to get, but here's trying, Peter. There's death, and then even worse than death there's annihilation. Know what that is? Ordinary little deaths, like I'll do to him today, those ain't the end for people like me and Jack and the others. We're Recurring; we just get reborn and grow up all over again, but in different bodies. As we become adult it dawns in us who we are and what we have to do, but in the meantime the world is rid of us till we reach our maturity again.

"But Seth and Sally, they're annihilated and dead forever and won't be back. Jack-the-Lad ... well, him and me, hunting and killing each other, it's just what we have to do now, and we always shall."

It was far beyond Peter. But he was giving it a valiant try. "You want to see the Cunning of it, Peter? The law?"

"I suppose."

Rosalind squatted down and marked out a square in the dust of the floor with her finger. "Then look here. Four corners, and one of us for each corner. The top half o' the square, so these two corners, stands for order, talk, and thought. The bottom half is chaos, action, and instinct. The right side of the square, so these two corners, stands for the future. The left side, for the past. Got all that?"

"Aye," said Peter dubiously.

She drew an R in the dust by the top right corner. "Here I am, up here, so what's that then? Talk, order, and the future: Life Anticipated, or prophecy. That's me. Jack-the-Lad, he's at the opposite corner, bottom left. Action, chaos, and the past: Life Lived and Savored. Sally was here on the bottom right corner, below me, for action and the future. She was a fighter: Life Striven For. And did she ever strive! Oh, Peter, if you'd only met Sally! I can tell you don't give a toss for me, but if you'd known Sally you'd give up your life to follow her forever. And that's what men did. Still do, in a way. But, it in't the same now."

"Then Seth would be here?"

"Aye, on the last corner, top left, Seth, talking and the past. Order. A bard, a scribe, a record-keeper: Life Understood. He had a rare gift, did Seth, he was the soul and memory of every village and city. But all too soon everyone learned to write and record for themselves, and he became irrelevant and dissipated. You still think I'm crazy, Peter, don't you?"

She'd caught him with his mouth open and not a clue what might escape from it. Eventually he said, "Don't know, mam. In't much sense in this. It's just a square."

"And there are many other squares I've heard tell of. Other patterns, other Cunnings." Rosalind stood. "But that's how ours works, and I think it's the most basic. Earth, air, fire, water? Well, I'm Air. Sally was Water, Seth was Earth. And Jack, well, Jack is Fire. And that's all there is to it."

Peter shook his head.

Rosalind grinned widely, happier than she'd been for years, just for having told the tale. Here was the essence of Life Understood, and for a moment she was keeping true to Seth's memory. "Never mind. Let's just get this done."

"And you're thirty-seven?" said Peter, thoughtfully.

"Aye," said Rosalind. "Ancient."

Some time later, Rosalind Theaker became convinced she had been buried in the smoky intestines of the earth and was fated to prowl the hacked-out burrows of the deep forever, like a hapless Greek demigod consigned to eternal torment for some long-forgotten sin. The stooping walk, the endless tripping, the haunting memories of past and future sorrows.... To calm herself she watched Peter's back as he led the way in the flickering light, and listened to the rasp of his breathing.

Ah, the air. The key to her disorientation must be the lack of ventilation, but peering askance Rosalind confirmed for a fact that neither of them would pass out nor suffer lasting harm. It was only air, after all, and wasn't she Air herself?

She rubbed her eyes and looked more closely at their surroundings.

"We're nearly there," she said quietly.

The crudity of these old workings and the wedges of coal left clumsily unremoved told her that they were now about as far back into the history of this colliery as it was possible to reach. Ironically it was more open and spacious here than anywhere else she'd been; the last century's miners had found and worked the tallest seam first, with pick and crowbar, and as they retreated they'd pulled away and mined most of the columns protecting them from collapse, uprooting their last defense against pressure and gravity.

"Nearly?" said Peter, checking the flame in his lamp again. He'd been obsessing about the air for nigh on an hour; the flame had seemed subdued and often flickered but had not changed its color.

Rosalind stood very still. "Wait. I'm wrong. We're well past 'nearly.' This is the place. In't it, Jack? Robin?"

She was answered only by the silence of the grave.

Rosalind began to twist and peek askance, then jumped and shrieked a warning to Peter, but it was too late: a flare went off in front of them, sudden, magnesium-white, brutal to the eyes. Rosalind felt her arm jerked violently aside as her lamp exploded; she yelped and flinched away from the flying glass. At the same time her helmet was lifted from behind and pushed roughly forward over her eyes. Peter tumbled against her other arm, robbing her of her freedom of movement as the strap slid from beneath her chin and the helmet came off.

Both her precious lights, stolen in an instant. As Peter staggered and turned, a second liquid crash marked the demise of his lamp too. Rosalind's next eyeblink opened to the deepest darkness.

She dropped to one knee and clawed at her face, expecting the warm damp of blood and the laceration of embedded glass, but found only her own skin. The lamp had evidently exploded away from her. Jack must be right by her, with a club or a two-by-four.

Damn it.

All this time she'd looked in vain for the manner of the ambush, worried that Jack might explode a charge to bring down the roof and trap them behind rock and rubble. But no, it was simpler than that to render them helpless as fresh-born mice. Here she was, exiled from light, surrounded by a blackness more total than she'd known for centuries, and she had not predicted the way of it, not in sufficient detail....

Rosalind recalled the shaking of her hand when Clegg had handed her the lit lamp, and her nervous startlement at even the momentary splinters of darkness in the cage and on the long walk. Her instincts had tried to warn her, all right, but she'd not been shrewd enough to read the signs.

She had not foreseen this because there had been literally nothing to see. The very blankness of her premonition should have been the clue.

Jack might be close enough to tackle, if she knew which way to grab. She still gripped the wreckage of the lantern, and it extended her reach a foot and a half. The last shards of its glass were still skittering across the rocky floor as Rosalind swung the safety lamp around her in a heavy arc. She felt its impact—crack!—and hurled herself at the obstacle it had found, only to run headlong into a column of packed stone. Gravel pitter-pattered across her scalp. She squawked briefly.

"What the heck you playin' at?" said Jack-the-Lad. "I'm over here."

He had already retreated twenty feet or more: Jack-be-Nimble. Even in this pitchy night where the very air had turned to coal, he could run rings around Rosalind.

Not that he was attempting to hide, since next moment he shouted, "Stop that! Little tinker. Be still!" Then came a wail.

"Jack, now! What're you doing to the boy?"

"What, this here? Salty Peter?"

"Ow!" said Peter's voice.

"Don't you be hurting him! Let 'un go."

"Didn't hurt him," said Jolly Jack. "Or leastways, I stopped now. My quarrel in't with him. Crawl away, little scrap, and let the grown-ups have their gossip. And Rosalind, even if he do get hurt, then you must have known he would be, and you chose to bring him anyhow. So you shan't blame me."

Peter spat, then he shouted again, this time at Rosalind: "What's this then? I trusted you! You're supposed to be Cunning! Feeding me all that guff, and you didn't see 'un coming?"

"What makes you think I didn't? Hush, now, Peter," she said, irritated.

"I'm nowt to do with this, sir," Peter babbled. "I don't know nothing, please don't do me no harm."

"Oh, do shut up," said Rosalind and Jack together, but it was only Jack who laughed.

"Second time you've denied me, Peter," she said. "Do as Jack says, and be still and quiet till we're done, you hear?"

Peter's whining had covered Rosalind's tippy-toe progress a few feet rightward. She no longer felt the scritch of broken glass under foot.

"Been such a while since we last met, Jack, and I can't even see you," she said. "In't fair."

"Aw," said Jack. "You live for my smile?"

"I live to see your face after you've died again," she said sweetly.

"Is that what happens today?" he said. "Do you win? Or do I convince you?"

"Of what?"

"Come on, Ros, it'd not change anything, never does, may as well tell me."

"I might lie."

Jack laughed. "You?"

The sound of Jack seemed to come from everywhere and all around. As he spoke she craned her head backward, forward, turned around widdershins, listening for how these small shifts changed the timber of his voice. Dreamily and almost without conscious thought, Rosalind began to acquire a sense of his position from the invisible patterns he imposed upon the air.

This was the nub of the difference between them: Rosalind could always impose order upon her surroundings. She could turn any stark set of arbitrary events into a story with a beginning and an end. The why and the how were easy for her, the what and wherefore often harder. For his part, Jack was the Midas of madness. Anything he touched turned to chaos, and the current mess was a perfect example.

"Those blinking Fey, enemies of knowledge, ephemera made eternal. If it were up to them, they'd like nowt better than to keep us repeating this stupid cycle for ever and ever."

"Well, hurry up then, convince me," said Rosalind. "Why bring me to this pit, Jack? What's the point?"

"Would you believe me?"

She took another step rightward. Her searching hand found another rock pillar, and Jack's voice changed, as if she was now hearing him round corners. Now there was something in the way. But Jack was moving too, slowly, and in a few moments she heard him directly again.

Rosalind had spent entire lifetimes blind. Even so, this would be hellish hard.

Said she: "For someone who wants to talk, you ain't sayin' much."

"Well, I'm listening to you creep around. It's funny. But, all right; I lured you here to get you away from the whispering of your damned Fey friends, Vervain and all, your so-called allies, though none of 'em will come down here with you, will they? Down here I don't hear the trees, and you don't see the future so well, eh? Down here I think maybe you ain't so privy to what's goin' to happen. Especially with the lights out. You're a seer who can't see. Whereas me, I'm Jack-of-the-Dark, Jack-of-the-Dead. So mine's the advantage, to make a bad pun." He cackled, Puck-like. "But Ros, that in't the best of it. Crux is: down here, we can choose what we want to be for our own selves."

"What?" said Rosalind. "What?"

Jack-the-Lad had stopped moving. She hadn't.

"Those blinking Fey, enemies of knowledge, ephemera made eternal. If it were up to them, they'd like nowt better than to keep us repeating this stupid cycle for ever and ever. 'Cause then we're not paying attention to them and their little schemes. If they can focus us on each other, it distracts us from what else we could be doing. Is that what we want? The Fey making our choices for us?" He'd started creeping sideways again.

"Not getting your drift, Jack. Down here's not your land. And we've no choice but to be what we are."

She heard a faint scuff sound maybe fifteen feet away. Probably he thought that moving made him harder to track, but in reality he was mapping out the lay of the land for her. It was like playing chess with her eyes closed, coming in halfway through the game; figuring out where the pieces were from the moves made, the moves avoided. Tricky to do that and also concentrate on the scrambled logic spilling from the mouth of the Puck.

"Oh, everything around us belongs to me in a way, eh? Coal, the past, the ancient fossils of dead trees. Well, you and me are ancient too, Rosalind, or the idea of us is anyway, which is a matter I'll address soon if you don't get the jump on me. Fact is, this is my land. You should know that already, being the queen of divination, but you only see what you want to see, and that's your flaw. Kept in caves with the big snake. Cassandra, Delphi, Mother Shipton. Eternal mysteries. No wonder you're batty."

Rosalind snorted. "They're long dead."

"But you and me, we're no mystery," said Jack. "No mist around us. We're archetypes, is what. Carl Gustav Jung? Archetypes? We're products of the collective unconscious, of the thoughts of all

"They force us into being, whether they will or no. We're deep shouts from old brains, mixed and stirred up from their most ancient beliefs. But for all that, we're just echoes. Archaic. Wishes made flesh."

humanity made whole and pushed into flesh. We stand for things, you and me. Different things, opposites, but where it really counts, we're the same."

"What?" said Rosalind. "Young? Collective?"

"For a Cunning Woman, you're not very well read," said Jack. "You claim to know the future, but you're all mired in the past. You need to keep up.

"That's Jung, with a 'J'. Don't know him? Too new? Well then, how's about Freud, "The Interpretation of Dreams," condensation, displacement? Another view into our dark spooky fossil brains. Or Saussure maybe: the signifier and the signified? You and I are the signifiers, made flesh. In your case the signified qualities are order, prediction, sureness, and boredom. In my case it's chaos, change, and being deeply fascinating. And Rosalind, do cut it out, this tryin' to sneak up on me while I talk, because for that you'd have to be less ... predictable."

Jack's voice had jumped off backward, ten feet or more. Damn.

The bitter dark made her eyes hurt. At least there was no air movement to provide an additional distraction. She bent to pick up a stone and lobbed it toward him. It clattered close by him and she heard him take a quick step leftward. Aha.

"Givin' you a chance, Jack," she said. "You wanted to talk. I thought you'd make more sense, but I'd forgotten how you are."

"Nay. You're just not listenin'. Alright then, how about Dirac and quantum mechanics? Energy states, making something from nothing? Good Christ, you haven't a lick of sense about any of this, do you?"

"You capering Jackanapes," said Rosalind. "I came to bury you, not talk philosophy."

"Look around you, we're buried already! All right, listen, here it is, tied up with a red ribbon: we don't matter anymore. We used to guide their thoughts. They used to need us. But they're shrewd now, intelligent, capable of managing their own lives, sharper brains, tighter thinking, not the gullible scaredies of centuries past. And they've dragged us out into the cold light. We're anachronisms, and we have no power over them anymore."

"Yet here we are," she said.

"Oh, we're still made. They can't help but create us. They force us into being, whether they will or no. We're deep shouts from old brains, mixed and stirred up from their most ancient beliefs. But for all that, we're just echoes. Archaic. Wishes made flesh.

"So where does that leave us? I'll tell you where, Ros. Vestigial. Irrelevant. And so this continuous fighting in different bodies for centuries is pointless too."

"Aye," she said.

"We're part of them. And now they know that, now they don't shrink away from every bump in the night, our power is broken. What was deep is now shallow. And that leaves us just ourselves. Which means we can choose what we want to be. We can choose not to kill each other."

Jack paused. "D'you understand, Rosalind? D'you understand?"

"Aye," she said again. "But it's a pity you didn't think of all this before you killed Sally."

A long silence descended before Jack said, aggrieved, "This is still about that?"

Jaggedly she replied, "You thought I'd just forget?"

"Sally would have gone and died anyway. Look around you. Where are the warriors now? Nope, I snuffed out an idea that was already dead. Like I should've done with Seth, and ended him with dignity instead of letting him weaken and dribble away alone. But forgive and forget, eh? Don't you want to put all that behind us? Be normal people again?" He took a breath. "Perhaps even be together?"

She made herself hesitate. "Perhaps I do."

"What's better, Ros? To see the future but be always looking back? Or to understand the world and look ahead with hope? And pride?"

She remembered the bombs falling into cities, years in the future. "Pride?"

"Yes. Foreknowledge is a curse. Ambiguity, ah, now that's worth something. I'll always believe in chance, Rosalind, and in hope, even if they don't exist. That's what it means to live. You, you miss it all."

"You're mad."

"I used to be. Not anymore. Consider what you're hearing, Rosalind. Me, Jack-the-Lad, Robin Goodfellow as-was, old British prankster, soul of mischief—talking of science and logic. I'm different. Aren't I? So, see: We can change. Now we know what we truly are, we must."

Rosalind bent for another rock, straightened. "I'd love for us to change, Robin."

Jack laughed, delighted. "See? Aren't you glad you came? To be able to say that.... Don't you love it down here? Snug, peaceful, none of the bleedin' Fey, just us. Down here it's all so very simple. Don't you think?"

"Very simple," said Rosalind.

She hurled the rock and sprinted after it.

"Ooof!" The rock slammed into him, then bounced away across the floor. Next second, Rosalind's shoulder met Jack's chest like a pickax whacking into the coalface. Jack was half-twisted away from the pain of the rock, wherever it had struck him, and off-balance enough to stagger, but he managed to grab her shoulders and stay upright. Rosalind ducked down and yanked his knee forward, kicking out at his other ankle, and over they went, arse over tip in a slag heap of thrashing archetypes.

Rosalind's palm met Jack's face and jolted it backward, wrenching his neck. ("Sweet Jack," she sobbed.) The blade in her other hand pierced his chest but she snatched it back out of him, fearing it would jam in a rib, and instead slid it deep into his stomach. Letting go his head, she wriggled clear so he could fold in two around the gut-wound.

Jack curled up with a short desperate scream, and Rosalind followed, planting her knee on his neck. She was ready to defend herself against further attack but his hands were clamped firmly over his stomach to hold himself in, and the untidy battle was already over. He hadn't even landed a blow on her.

"Jolly Jack ..."

The warm smell of his sweat reached out to her. There were times when they'd been lovers, which Jack had called Chaos cleaving into Order, and Rosalind had thought of as Order engulfing Chaos. Often they had wrestled to be the one on top, to make their case; the sexual politics of the Recurring.

Of course, neither of them had been bleeding to death at such times.

A crash and a bump, as Peter came running pell-mell through the darkness and tumbled over them both, hands questing, ready to help, ready to hit. His hand tangled in Rosalind's hair. "Peter, stop!" she shouted. "That's me, Jack's down, it's done. Get us a light!"

"What? How?" he cried.

Jack was mad, but not stupid. He must have planned for this. Rosalind felt his pockets and found a switchblade Jack hadn't even drawn, and a box that slid open. She pulled out the linen that Jack had stuffed in to muffle it, and it rattled. "Matches," she said, pushing them at Peter. "Use 'em to find Jack's lamp. He must have had one and set it aside."

Beneath her Jack whimpered and thrashed, ever more feebly. "Turned the tables on us," he gasped. "No longer a truth. Glimpsed. In shadow. Around the camp fire."

"Hush," she said.

"In the future," said Jack, "they will mass produce us."

The life ebbed from him now; he was dwindling for loss of it, and she knew he could not rise up and attack her again before the end. She crept down and wrapped her arms around him. "Sweet Jack. Don't talk."

He caressed her arm. "The Fey. Using you."

"I know," she said.

"I'm the Jack. You're the queen. Go and kill the king."

"Shhh." Tears poured down her cheeks now.

"At least ... I lived. You ... miss it all."

"I love you," she said, as the breath rattled from his throat and his body gave him up with a little sigh.

Yellow flame fizzed, vanished. "Ha," said Peter. His second match held good; after the utter darkness, it shone like a miniature sun. In the valuable moments before it faded Peter said "Hey!" with good cheer, and set off across the gallery. She heard him clicking the igniter, and within moments they were bathed in the safety lantern's cool glow.

Rosalind squinted down at Jack. His face was ordinary, bland. She did not recognize him. She had known him forever.

When she closed his eyes, her hand did not shake.

"You killed 'un," said Peter, marveling, horrified, scooting up close. "As foretold."

Fascinated, the boy reached out to touch the corpse. It was a compulsion she'd seen before. "Quit that, now! Show respect."

Peter froze, suddenly wary. "You be usin' that again?"

Rosalind was wiping her knife clean on Jack's shirt, returning his blood to him. "I just might," she said, but before the boy could panic, added, "Nay, not on you, Peter! You've nowt for brains if you believe that."

"I seen what you done here. I'm the only witness. You'll be for stabbin' me too, now, I'll be bound." But he met her eye calmly. Almost as if he were daring her to do it.

"Third time you've denied me," she said. "Listen, Peter; I can't lie. So when Clegg asks, you pipe up and say we didn't find Jack. Searched everywhere, but all for naught. Better that way. See?"

She watched him think about it. She didn't already know his answer, hadn't looked for it. But she could guess. He'd tried to aid her in the fight. A minute late and tuppence short, but he'd had a go. And his third denial had been strong, with little trace of the timidity he'd shown earlier. This dark day was stiffening Peter's spine.

Of course, his newfound strength would ultimately be the death of him.

"It weren't murder," she said quietly, to help him think. "Not hardly, when you stand up to someone bigger. Self-defense. Him or me. And if Jolly Jack had taken me down, d'ye think he'd have let you go?"

What's right often isn't what's easy or nice. She didn't say it again, but the living words still drifted around them in the dusty, scant air.

"Aye," said Peter suddenly. "All right, then."

Rosalind rested her fingers in Jack's blood and touched it lightly to the skin over her heart.

"Jack said you couldn't see the future, down here."

Rosalind turned askance, a quick motion of her head in that direction Peter could not see. She saw the knife in her hand once more, the unexpected toughness of Vervain's skin, the terrible spray of bright Fey blood, his comical surprise.

After she killed the king, no Fey would ever help her again. But she didn't want their help anymore. Time to stand on her own two archetypal feet.

War was coming. She'd have to face it with no distraction. Doomed to live on as they all died around her.

"Jack was wrong." Rosalind tucked the knife back into her boot. "You heard 'un. Nowt he says makes sense."

Peter touched her arm. "When do I die?"

"What?"

"I want to know," he said. "Then at least I'll be able to count on that long."

"No."

Peter leaned forward and rested his other hand on Jack's shoulder, linking them all. Absorbing the experience of Life Lived and Savored, even as Jack's skin cooled. Taking strength from Life Anticipated. Not backing away from the horror. Just as he would not back down when his own turn came.

"You are older than you look," she said.

"Aye," he said. "And I've asked, and now you got to tell me, and not lie. In't that how it works?"

"No...." She felt nauseous, but his hand still gripped her arm, and the urge to prophesy was almost irresistible.

"Then tell me I'm not poor!" he said. "Those crippled old sods, scrabblin' on the slag heaps for little crappy bits of coal, is that me? Do I die like that?"

"Peter ..."

"You got to tell me."

The breath clamped in her throat as she twisted askance. There was Peter, downstream: in his fifties, jaundiced and aggressive. There were the police, with their clubs and their ferocity. It was the same death in the same future, but it looked different now.

Rosalind saw a Peter doing what was right, fueled by the fires of conviction. A strong man full of righteous fury.

Not at all like the pit tramps, grubbing for tiny chips of energy on a mountain of ash.

"Tell me!"

The future changed, she thought.

But that was wrong. The future was always the same. She was different. Not the impossible, warping change Jack sought in her, but an alteration nonetheless.

"The slag heap?" said Rosalind. "Nay, that's not your death. You die fighting, Peter, and your cause is good. You die rich. Richer than most men." She sucked down a ragged breath. "Richer than me."

"Richer than Jack?"

It was an odd question. Rosalind looked down one final time on Jack-the-Lad, lying as inert and peaceful as coal. A fossil himself, doomed to rest here amid the exhausted seams of history, his passing unmarked.

"Oh, aye. Richer than that 'un, by far."

"Good," said Peter, standing up. "Good. Well, come on then."

"You're Sally's after all," she said, realizing.

Again, Jack had died with lies warm upon his tongue, his lips frothing with chaos. He was mad; she, cursed. Yet she was alive, so who was the fool now?

You miss it all.

During that weaving of the blackness into a pattern, Rosalind had felt close to some deeper insight, perhaps about herself and her nature, or the ultimate meaning of the Recurring. One last twist of Cunning and it might have been hers. But it had eluded her. Whatever understanding she might one day glean from her many lifetimes, it would not happen today.

Perhaps she had won too easily. Again.

"I'll stay a while," she said.

"Nay, you won't," said Peter sternly. "Get up. Up!"

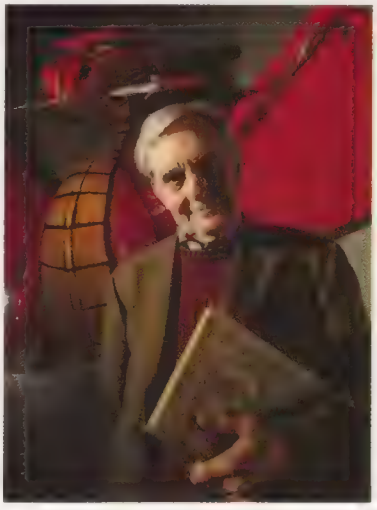
Tears flooded her eyes as Rosalind stood, turning her back on Jack and on the past. "All right. I'm coming. Get along wi' you, lead the way," and fell in step behind Peter, the boy and the man; followed him, stumbling blindly, into a future bright as fire. ❧

By Jeff VanderMeer

How to Raise and Keep an Imagination: Joseph Nigg and the Power of Fantasy

Joseph Nigg saw the boundaries between fantasy and reality blur upon publication of his How to Raise and Keep a Dragon. *He responds to mail from hundreds of kids and their parents who want to know all about dragons and gages his answers to the playfulness or sincerity of the query. The book has been published in more than 20 countries so his fans will keep him busy for many years to come.*

Once upon a time, in a world in which Harry Potter and the Spiderwick Chronicles *had primed children's imaginations to expect the extraordinary, a rather remarkable book called* How to Raise and Keep a Dragon *appeared in bookstores. This lavishly illustrated tome—supposedly written by a descendent of the 17th-century British naturalist Edward Topsell, author of the* Historie of Serpents *(1608)—presented an array of fantastical serpents, including such delightful eccentricities as the Joppa Dragon, with its walrus-like nose and "blazing eyes." Each entry came complete with a map locator for each species, skin swatch, egg description, and height/size details. Topsell also claimed to provide all of the information needed to acquire and take care of a dragon, up to and including the addresses of supposed dragon sellers. The would-be dragon owner could also learn more prosaic details, such as housing basics, training tips, and showing dragons in competition. Practical advice included such wisdom as: "The larger the dragon, the more expensive it will be" to "Be honest [about wanting a dragon] because if you're not, you—and your dragon—might be in for much grief." As might be expected, then, this rare and fanciful book became an international bestseller—although not without certain consequences for the true author.*



Perhaps some collisions between fantasy and reality are inevitable. Noted author Joseph Nigg, who wrote *How to Raise and Keep a Dragon* under the fanciful pseudonym "John Topsell," found that out in 2006, soon after publication.

Nigg began to get fan mail from kids who wanted their own "Standard Western Dragon" or "Multi-headed Dragon." Typical questions were a testament to the effortless level of detail Nigg had brought to his creation. "How big should a miniature dragon's room be, at the smallest?" one child asked. Another wanted more information on common dragon diseases: "I saw the thing about mouth-rot but how do you see it and [cure] it?"

One of the world's foremost experts on imaginary beasts, Nigg was no stranger to the spotlight—he had been the subject of frequent interviews, been reviewed in *USA Today*, and appeared on the "Dragons" episode of A&E's *Ancient Mysteries* TV series. Nigg's 1999 Oxford University Press anthology, *The*

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Book of Fabulous Beasts: A Treasury of Writings from Ancient Times to the Present, which traces the literary evolution of a host of mythical beasts, from the Babylonians to Tolkien, had established him as perhaps the Joseph Campbell of his field. Respected mythologists like David Leeming had called *The Book of Fabulous Beasts* "the definitive work."

However, none of this prior experience prepared Nigg for the tidal wave of reaction to *How to Raise and Keep a Dragon*—in part because, as he noted in an *Edmonton Journal* interview, "I wrote it as an adult book, as a parody of animal-raising books. I figured bookstores would put it next to the books on how to train dogs."

But by the time the book was published, it had morphed into a fake but serious dragon guide aimed at children, with convincing two-page spreads by the somewhat less mythical artist Dan Malone. Previous books and awards had put Nigg on the map, but via Topsell's creation it now appeared his fans were drawing him into uncharted territory. He'd never experienced "anything like the enthusiastic readership that *How to Raise and Keep a Dragon* enjoys."

"Enthusiastic" might be an understatement. Two years later, Nigg continues to receive fan mail from young readers and some parents; he even received a new one on the day I interviewed him for this article: "I would like to find the actual address and phone number for Dragon House Inc. because I think it would be awesome to have a miniature Standard Western Dragon. By the way, please don't order me a dragon."

Nigg's approach to writing the book—not winking, not giving in to the temptation to reveal the fabrication—is not without its dangers, as his fan mail reveals. Some who have written to Nigg express this cautiously, as exemplified by the reader who told him, "I am an eleven-year-old fan of dragons, and I am wondering what you think about them. I must ask, do you truly believe dragons are/were real? Please answer truthfully, I do not like being misguided."

However, others have clearly taken the "deception" more personally, with one child writing: "Why did you lie to me? I was so upset when I asked my mom where Babylon was. because I wanted to train a Mushussu dragon. She told me about how it was now Iraq and that it no longer exists. I hate you!"

Another interesting dynamic soon emerged as well. While some parents had clearly told their children the truth about dragons, others had found ingenious ways to support their kid's imagination, without exactly lying. One anonymous commenter wrote, "My dad believes, but he believes they are in a different world, and that you have to get there through a portal. He knows a dragon summoning spell, but he said it's too hard for me."

Nigg used to try to gauge from the tone of correspondence whether a child or parent was "playing or serious." Depending on the context, he would give a whimsical or realistic response. But now, because it's often difficult to determine context, "unless I can tell if a young fan is playing (already has a dragon that sleeps on the couch, goes to the store, etc.), I give my standard response about mythical creatures and lizards called 'dragons,' and that I recommend imagining a dragon friend and raising it while reading the book."

More publicly, an often heated debate over the existence of dragons still rages in the comments thread to an Amazon.com feature on Nigg's book. On this thread, any statements that dragons are imaginary have been met with contempt by the kids invested in responding.

Some dragon enthusiasts on the Amazon.com thread also lament their lack of a dragon, like a boy named Tian, who wrote, "I am a student dragonologist and it would be really helpful if I actually HAD a dragon! That way I could ask it so many questions, like 'How do you breathe fire?' The phosphorus method doesn't work. I tested it myself. Please post back to the question how to get a dragon!"

Others actually have a dragon, like Ashly: "I just got the drakon dragon and it's a boy. He is so cute. Has very hard scales that are orangeish-yellowish, has three rows of teeth and has a three-forked tongue. He's a miniature, and he ate his egg when he was born. His egg was golden and shiny."

Still others have used the Amazon debate to spin tall tales about dragon creation. An entry by a boy named Indago related how he came across a spell that helped him find a dragon. After "going through the inconvenience of getting thirty banana slugs, I did the spell." A week later, says Indago, he bought a Dragon of India figurine in a pet store, as an adornment for an aquarium. The next day it was gone, "and so were the fish." Later, he found the live dragon, which he has named Gold Fire, while walking on his family's two-acre lot. So far as anyone knows, Indago and Gold Fire are still inseparable companions to this day.

Among the hundreds of emails and letters Nigg has received, he has a couple of clear favorites.

"The most touching was a kid who cut the Worldwide Dragon Club registration application out of his book, completed it, and with his grandmother's help, sent it to me. Even though I made it clear to him that this was a fantasy, I returned the form to him, approved, along with a Certificate of Merit that the application promises. His grandmother sent me a photograph of him with a dragon he made of baking clay body and coffee filter wings, and told me that in his school play that night he was a dragon that escaped from a dungeon and became a hero. The grandmother thanked me effusively for a wonderful experience for her grandson and wrote me later that he had bought another copy of the book—which remained intact.

"I was also delighted by the postal letter of a young girl in New Zealand. Along with her questions about dragons was a colored draw-

ing she made of a Mushussu and a hand-drawn map of her country, containing a dot labeled, 'This is Where I Live.' She requested a picture of a Mushussu to hang on the wall of her room, so I sent her one."

As might be expected, Nigg finds this level of commitment healthy: "It's natural. Separating the [real and the unreal] is the process of maturation, socialization, but to live fully is to balance the two....Whether they believe in dragons or joyfully participate in the fantasy, young dragon fans have vibrant imaginations that one can only hope they retain in later life."

Supporting a child's imagination is often an important part of becoming a healthy adult. As Nigg puts it, "The richer their youthful imaginations are, and the longer they can nourish them, the fuller and happier their lives are likely to be thereafter."

The classic fantasist Lloyd Alexander is famously known for quoting another icon on this subject: "When asked how to develop intelligence in young people, Einstein answered: 'Read fairy tales. Then read more fairy tales.' Fairy tales and fantasies nourish the imagination and imagination supports our whole intellectual and psychological economy."

But why have dragons captured and fascinated so many young imaginations? Nigg has some theories.

"Dragons are the most ancient and universal of all imaginary animals—and the most difficult to write about, because they are so fluid. People of virtually every culture since the Babylonians have needed dragons so much that they created their own—perhaps, at least in part, to control fears of cosmic forces they did not understand. Even after 17th-century science discredited most imaginary animals, such creatures eventually returned in art, literature, and all commercial forms. We—and not just kids—wanted them back. We needed them for our inner lives. In the case of children, there is also the fixation with dinosaurs, extinct relatives of imaginary dragons."

Nigg also points out that, "It's not just kids and dragons. A lifelong geologist friend of mine, a serious scientist, was disappointed when he realized that the documentary he was watching on the discovery of fossilized dragon bones in an ice cave in Romania was a fanciful dramatization. And what about our perennial interest in Bigfoot, the Loch Ness Monster, the Abominable Snowman, and all? Hamlet says, 'There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than you have dreamt of in your philosophy,' and we all translate that in our own way. We want there to be more than what we see around us. It's our way of nourishing the inner life, balancing it against the outside world. That's just the way we are."

Nigg's inner life has long included the fantastic, starting with a fascination with "an image of a winged lion with a fish tail, on an old brass oil lamp from my parents' antique shop. Intrigued by the creature's hybrid nature, I began researching imaginary animals, which led me to the eagle-lion griffin.

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Years later, when my young boys were playing on the living room floor and a friend's daughter was showing me a unicorn book she'd gotten for Christmas, a grand griffin figure surprisingly materialized in my imagination. Soon after that, my wife Esther told me about a griffin she knew of in a storeroom at the local art museum. When we went down there, the staff allowed me to see—and actually hold in my hand!—an ancient Persian silver cup embossed with a griffin image. Time melted for me. I was hooked."

For this reason, the eagle-lion griffin is perhaps Nigg's favorite. "It was the first that showed me the rich cultural histories of imaginary creatures. Also, the combined King of Beasts and Monarch of the Air, personifying both the real world and the transforming imagination, is, for me, the ideal writer's emblem. I dedicated the book to my sons, Joey and Mike, and Joey still collects griffins. My grandkids have grown up with a three-foot-high griffin in their living room.

"I'm also enthralled by the mythical phoenix, which dies in its nest and rises, reborn, from its own ashes. The wondrous bird's transformations in literature and art through the ages mirror its simple fable. We all relive its story every day by sleeping through the dark and rising with the sun. I've been working for years on a phoenix book, *Bird of Wonder,* balancing it with commissioned books on dragons—and answering emails from young dragon fans. My work hours these days are divided between these two animals, variations of the two that are so often depicted together in Asian art."

The fascination children have shown toward *How to Raise and Keep a Dragon* may have something to do with the dedication Nigg has demonstrated in documenting his love of the fantastic. Certainly the instant-classic quality of the book reflects Nigg's level of comfort with the material—it's unlikely anyone else could have made it so playful yet assured.

Nigg's wife Esther, who has helped him on many projects, and to whom he has dedicated several books, has been in a unique position to observe the progression of Nigg's career and passions.

"I got to watch the books about fabulous animals take off: *The Book of Gryphons,* the Oxford University Press book, and all the others," she says. "The latest book—and his availability through his website—has been crazy. The professor who's deeply grounded in mythology is now in daily communication with fans, especially dragon-fanciers, who want to play the game, to raise their own dragons. He finds a way to answer them all, even as he works on a major new project ... Amazing."

Nigg points out that all the books have been enriched by the ideas of family and friends—the current tome most of all. "Everybody who knew I was working on the book enthusiastically offered fanciful tips about how to raise a dragon," he says.

This learned and even-tempered man with multiple degrees to his credit, and a stint at the famed Iowa Writers' Workshop, seems today as engaged and energized about these "imaginary" animals as when he published that first book, *The Book of Gryphons,* back in 1982. Since then, in addition to *The Book of Fabulous Beasts* and his current volume, he has also published *A Guide to the Imaginary Birds of the World, The Book of Dragons & Other Mythical Beasts,* and *Wonder Beasts: Tales and Lore of the Phoenix, the Griffin, the Unicorn, and the Dragon,* a collection for middle-school students.

"The more I delve into the cultural histories of 'mythical' creatures, the more fascinated I am by the transformation of ideas and images across time. It was nearly five hundred years between Herodotus's seminal account of the phoenix and the next major telling of the tale. That second passage, in Ovid's *Metamorphoses,* did much to generate the first flourishing of the phoenix story, in Greco-Roman writings. A phoenix illumination in a medieval bestiary rises again in D.H. Lawrence's famous phoenix emblem. And so it goes, with literary archeology multiplying the dots and connections between them."

Nigg's passion extends to enthusiasm for the words of others on his favorite subject: "When Goethe's Faust sees mythical creatures on the Pharsalian Plain, he says: 'Fresh spirit fills me, face to face with these / – Grand are the Forms, and Grand the Memories!' and then, in Shakespeare's *Tempest,* one of the astonished travelers watching spirits dance in Prospero's court, exclaims: "['A] living drollery. Now I will believe / That there are unicorns; that in Arabia / There is one tree, the phoenix' throne; one phoenix / At this hour reigning there.' It is to be noted that this is an ironic passage. I also like Milton describing the phoenix as having 'ages of lives.'"

Perhaps only in an area as universal as myth and fantasy could you find such a spectrum of responses, from Milton to a ten-year-old kid who writes, "I do have a dragon pipling (baby) that no one knows about except for a few of my friends. He is a green and red Standard Western Dragon named Briton (Br-it-on). He looks just like the one displayed in the dragon breed section of the book. He is so cute and loveable, and yes he is real but he turns invisible and unhearable when strangers come around. He also shrinks for fun, and when strangers are around. He is very protective of me and everybody I know that is nice to me. If your parents tell you that dragons do not exist, they're wrong, they probably think that because they lost their kidlike mind and plus, it is very hard to purchase a dragon."

Nigg's own fantasy life, too, began early. "My father supervised the building of power plants, so I grew up in a house trailer all over the Midwest. My only constant friends were Huck, Tom, Jim Hawkins, Mowgli, and the host of characters in my treasured stack of Classic Comic Books."

Now, much as those classics nourished him, his latest book is nourishing a new generation of readers. As for that fan mail, it isn't likely to level off any time soon. *How to Raise and Keep a Dragon* has been published in more than 20 countries to date.

For more information, visit Joseph Nigg's website at: www.josephnigg.com and www. omnivoracious.com/2008/02/how-to-raise-an.html

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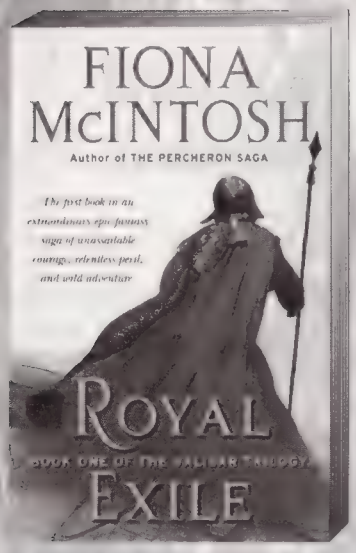

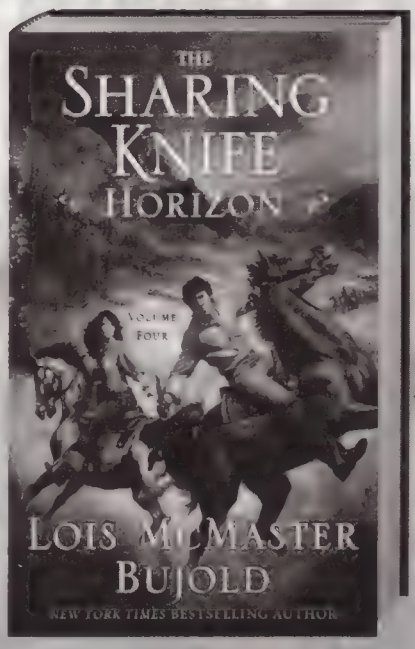

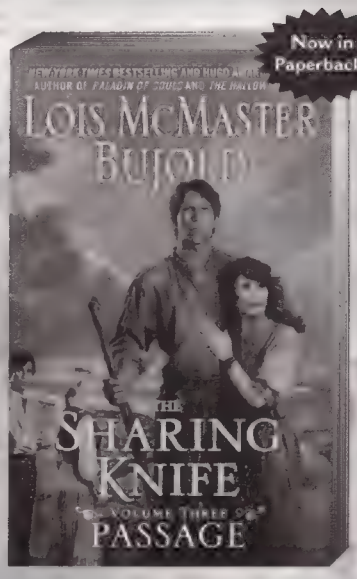

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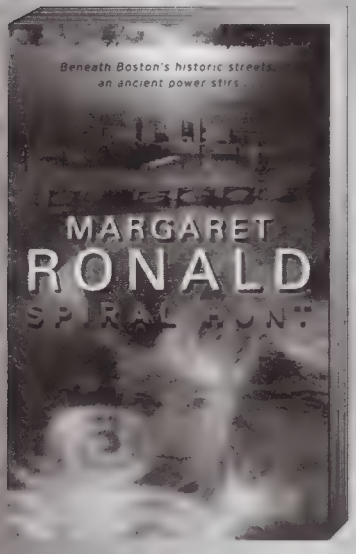

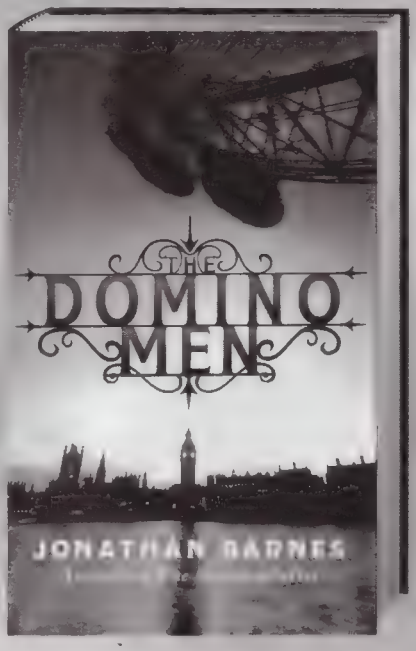

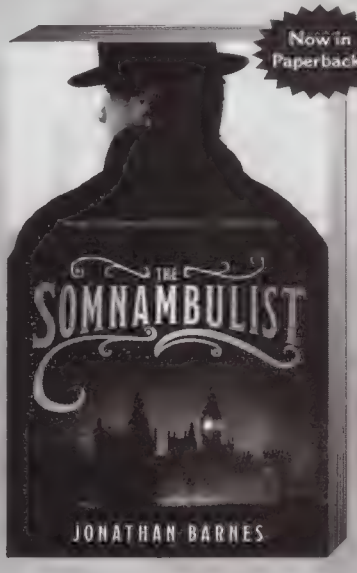

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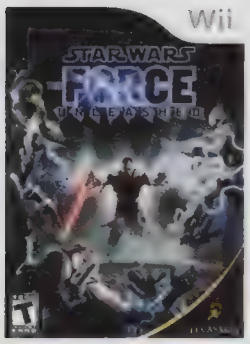
By Eric T. Baker

Enter a compelling story as a powerful Jedi in *Star Wars the Force Unleashed.*



Star Wars the Force Unleashed by and from Lucas Arts is available on just about every system except (oddly) the PC. This review doesn't deal with the DS or the PSP versions, which are (apparently) significantly different from the console versions. The game was created for the 360 and the PS3, which this review does deal with, and it was ported to the Wii and the PS2. What the ported versions lose are the high-end physics and graphics of the 360 and PS3 versions. What the Wii port has that the others don't is waving the Wiimote to make the game's protagonist wave his light saber.

The game is set between the first three movies and the last three, after the Clone Wars have ended and nearly all of the Jedi are dead. Players take the role of a young dark Jedi named Starkiller (Luke

Thousands of art pieces went into building the world of Star Wars the Force Unleashed *from Lucas Arts. The game is exceptionally beautiful on the 360 and PS3.*

Skywalker's original name in the first drafts of the first *Star Wars* script) who is Darth Vader's secret apprentice. Why Starkiller is a secret is revealed as the game goes along. Vader and the Emperor are characters in the game's story, but most of Starkiller's (and thus the player's) interactions are with his loyal but murder-intent droid, Proxy, and his sexy and hyper-competent pilot, Juno Eclipse.

The game is in the third-person action format. The player guides Starkiller through a series of levels, killing hordes of minions and slowly adding and improving Force powers, light saber combos, and passive talents. There are minor bosses along the way and each level ends with a big boss, usually a light-side Jedi who is the target of the mission. Occasionally, and particularly at the end of boss fights, the normal play of button mashing and stick waggling is set aside for a "quicktime sequence": the player must hit certain buttons as they appear on the screen to unlock a series of short animations that show

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the destruction of the enemy.

The game starts with three difficulties. On easy, even players with slow reflexes will be able to hack and force push their way through the game with relative ease. Players who are good at tapping out combos can take on the higher difficulties. The one warning is that while the main path of the game is fairly linear, each level also contains a number of "Jedi Hologrons" that grant extra experience. Collecting them significantly increases how fast Starkiller becomes amazingly badass, but many of them can only be reached by solving various *Tomb Raider*-like jumping puzzles. Since the save system is by points instead of save anywhere, it can take longer trying jumps over and over than it does to clear the level.

It is almost impossible to convey how beautiful this game is on the 360 and PS3. The backgrounds are full of objects, usually in motion. Up close, objects are detailed, intricately colored and animated, and varied in construction. The artists did not just build the world from the same score of objects and background panels used over and over. There are hundreds of art pieces, and even when they are reused, they are often redecorated, as on the junk planet of Raxus Prime where objects from the other levels appear in a broken and battered mishmash. All of this applies to the character animations as well, with the added bonus of some really good voice acting conveyed with excellent sound production.

Other than the jumping puzzles, the only thing to be said against *SWFU* is that it is relatively short. Skilled players will be able to finish it in under ten hours. There is some replay value in going back to the early levels with the fully powered Starkiller, but there is no online death match. For Wii owners, there is a two-player duel mode that lets two people in the same room wave their Wiimotes at one another. The bottom line of *SWFU*, though, is that it is a beautifully done simulation of being a very powerful Jedi that also tells a compelling story. What more can be asked of a *Star Wars* game?

The most anticipated MMO since *Age of Conan*, or perhaps *Lord of the Rings Online*, is now available. ***Warhammer Age of Reckoning*** is based on the UK's Games Workshop's *Warhammer Fantasy* universe of miniatures and role-playing and computer RTS games. *WAR* lets players take on the role of a warrior or spell caster in one of six races from the mythos. Due to its built-in player base, as well as its heavy financial backing from Electronic Arts, and its creation by Mythic Entertainment, the company responsible for the successful *Dark Age of Camelot* MMO, players and analysts have looked forward to *WAR* as having a chance to gain a *World of Warcraft* level of popular success.

Like *DAoC*, *WAR* is a realm vs. realm game. In the lore of the game this means that the Humans are fighting Chaos, the Dwarves are fighting the Green Skins (orcs and goblins), and the High Elves are fighting the Dark Elves. In practice this mean that players who roll up a Dark Elf will complete quests against High Elf antagonists, and when they enter the player vs. player battlegrounds, they will fight players who are controlling

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High Elves. And so on with the other race pairings. There are a variety of player vs. player encounters in the game and winning them scores points for the victorious side. Accumulating points allows the sides to gain territory and culminates in the capture and looting of the enemy capital. Once the looting is complete, the points reset and the campaign starts again.

Hardware-wise, *WAR* is not nearly as demanding as *AoC*. In fact, systems that run *WoW* well will have no trouble with *WAR*. This is mostly due to the graphics style. Characters, backgrounds, and objects are done in a representative, "cartoonish" style like that of *WoW* and unlike the more "realistic" look of *AoC* or a single-player game like *SWFU*. Players who liked the look of the *Warhammer* mythos in its previous video game incarnations will have no problem with how it looks here.

Other than the realm vs. realm metagame, *WAR* is like most other MMOs. To find quests, the player looks for characters with exclaimation marks over their heads. There are snippets of spoken dialogue, but mostly the player just reads the quest pop-ups. There are no dialogue trees to work through. Some of the NPCs act out little animated shows and some of these are keyed to quests. Players take quests to kill NPCs to earn experience and gold so they can level up and buy better gear so they can take higher quests to kill bigger NPCs and so on.

One of the things that separates *WAR* from the other big MMOs is that players' characters can earn experience from the various player vs. player combat options. It is possible to make it to the level cap by only fighting in the PvP areas, and technically, it isn't even necessary to fight. Most of the instances give points just for being in them, but more points are earned for kills and for winning the encounters. Thus it is both quicker and more interesting to actually fight in PvP and to mix in the game's many quests as well.

The one innovation that *WAR* introduces is public quests. These are areas out in the open server (not instanced) where recorded events happen, usually running battles of some sort.

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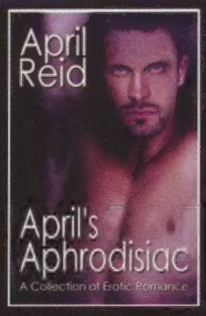

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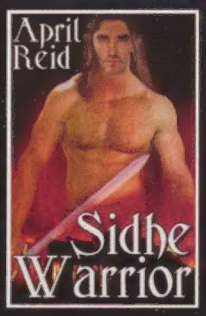

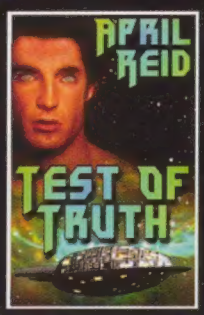

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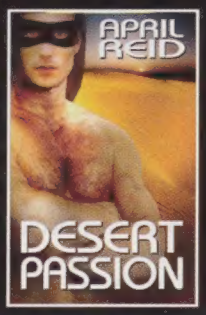

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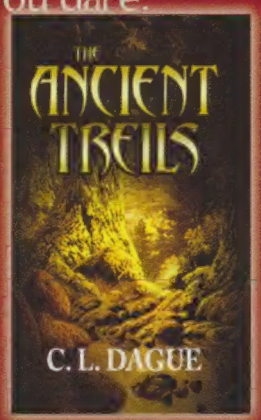

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They run in about ten minute stages and just by wandering into them, the characters can join in, earning experience for their kills. In addition, at the end of the scripted event, the players can click on a chest and earn a reward scaled to how long they were in quest and how much they did during that time. Other games have had wandering monsters

players could join together to defeat, but this is the first game to create elaborate and open scenarios of this kind.

As of this writing, *WAR* is selling extremely well, but it is too early to know if it will end up with a *WoW*-sized player base. It is a big, well polished game with a wide variety of characters to choose from and a lot of world to explore. *WAR* does not reinvent the MMO genre, and does in fact at times feel like every other MMO released in the last ten years, but the same things could be (and were) said of *WoW*. In video games as much or more than any other media, what people want is more of what they like, only different this time. *WAR* is definitely that.

Another MMO that is more of the same while being different is ***Wizard101*** for the PC from KingsIsle Entertainment. This is a free-to-play MMO in the tradition of Disney's *Toontown* and Jagex Ltd.'s *RuneScape*. Aimed at tweens and theirs families, *Wizard101* lets players take the role of a young wizard at the Ravenwood School for Magic Arts. The game starts players out in several free-to-play zones, but paying a monthly fee of $10 (less per month if players buy a longer plan) opens up four more realms, each the size of the free zone.

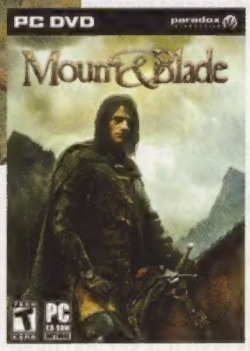
Although it is specced for computers even less powerful than the ones *WaR* needs, in some ways *Wizard101* actually looks better. This is because its draw distance isn't as far; all the character models, objects, and textures are thus larger on the screen. Players don't get to see vistas like they do in higher end MMOs, but they can, for example, tell what color eyes the other characters have.

The combat mechanic in *Wizard101* is one of cards. "This is like Pokemon on the computer" is how my ten year-old described it and he's completely right, except that players get new cards by leveling rather by buying them. The biggest difference from a normal MMO is that characters can't group. Combat takes place in designated circles, and if a fight is going on, a player can join it, but there is no way to form a party and go about the world that way. Of course, if the player is a tween who has never played a game that allowed grouping, they won't miss it.

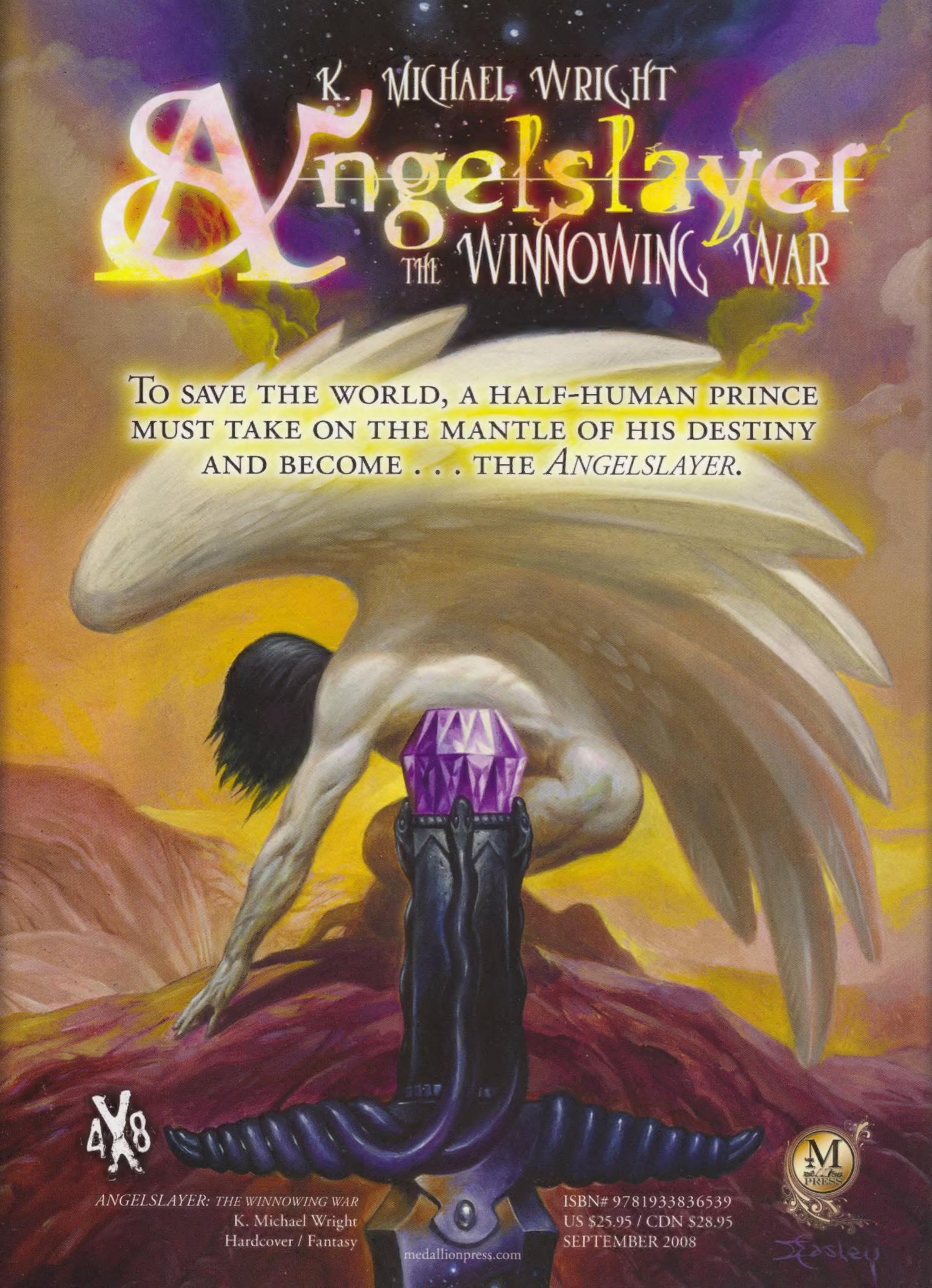
Based on my own tween, who was frustrated by *Toontown* but played the heck out of *Club Penguin*, *Wizard101* strikes a good balance. It is an interesting background with a good-looking client whose game play is interesting without being too complicated. And its free to get started, which is always a great way to give a game a try.

Two games from Paradox Interactive for the PC finish up this column. ***Mount & Blade*** is a free-roaming roleplaying game in a medieval setting that contains no fantasy elements. ***Dark Horizon*** is fighter combat game set in space. Both of them are relatively cheap ($30 each compared to the $60 that *SWFU* runs), are available via digital download, and both have a very small footprint on the computer's hard drive. Both games have great elements to them, but in both cases the final product shows how small their creation budgets were.

Take *M&B* for instance. The game play is to ride from town to town on a strategic map, then explore the town for quests, jobs, followers, and provisions. Unfortunately, because of the small art budget, all the towns and all the people in them look basically the same. The combat in the game, particularly when the character is mounted on a horse, is complex and yet entertaining, but there is no story to pull the player through. There is just the exploring, which isn't much of a draw when everything looks the same, and the leveling, which is long and complex.



Dark Horizon has story. In fact, if the player is willing to consume all the text that is available in the many mission screens, there is probably a novel's worth of back story to the game. Combat is straightforward but has enough options to keep it interesting. Where the game falls down is between missions where players are supposed to organize their salvage and upgrade their ships. This is a very opaque process and some of the text that went into the background should have been spent on making it much clearer.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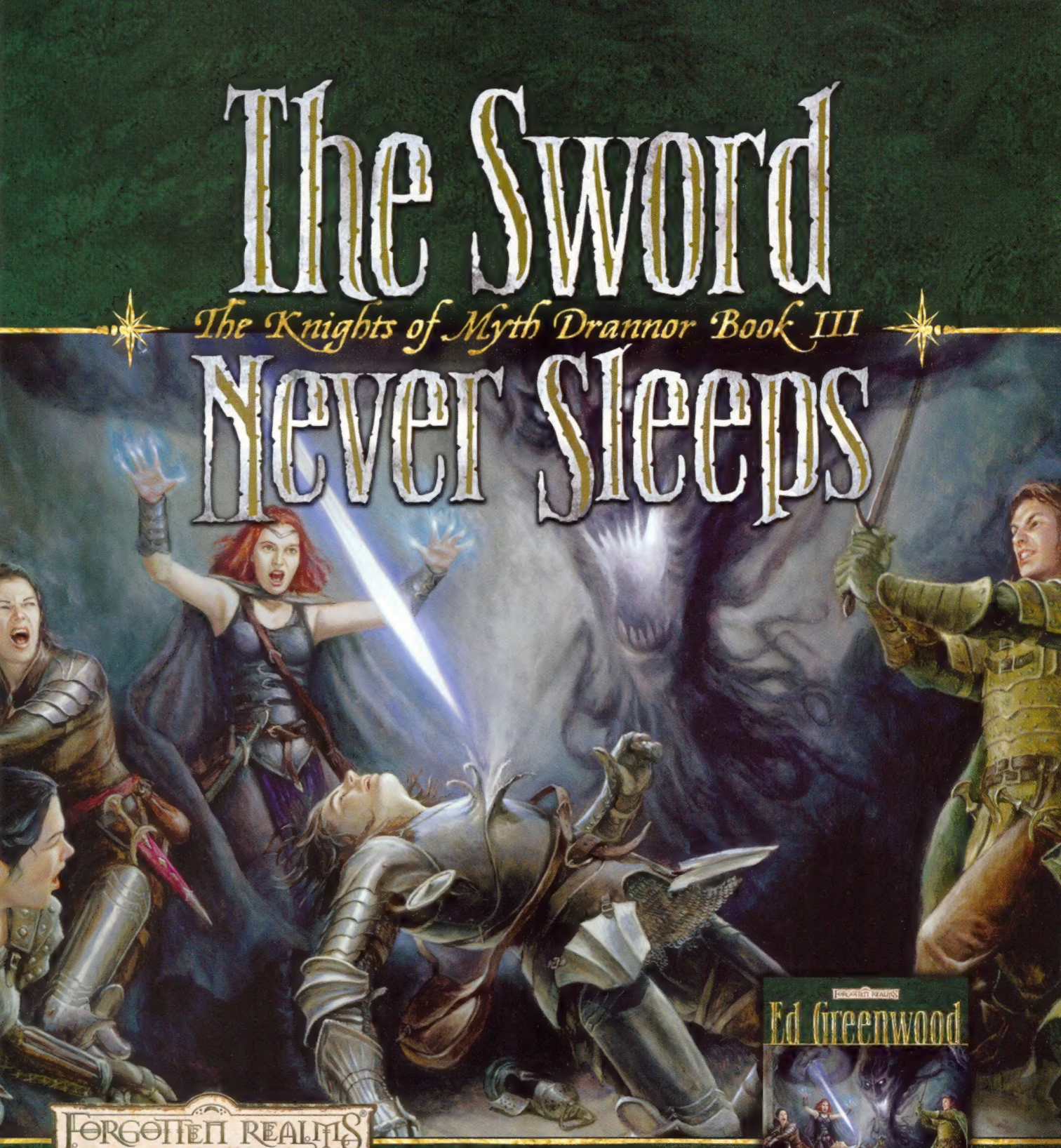

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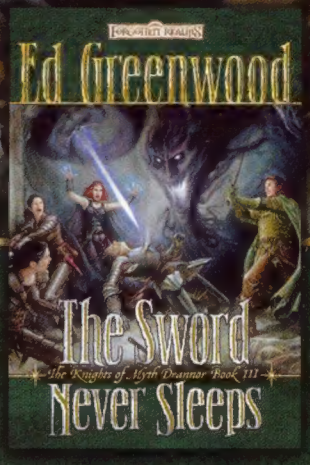

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